

A romantic couple in historical attire embracing in a snowy mountain landscape. The man is wearing a gold brocade jacket and the woman is wearing a pink and white lace dress. They are standing in a snowy field with evergreen trees in the background under a dramatic, colorful sky.

ANNA MACY

HIS
HEART FOR
THE
Holidays

A HOLIDAY HISTORICAL ROMANCE

His Heart for the Holidays:
A Holiday Historical Romance

By:
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His Heart for the Holidays: A Holiday Historical Romance

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Dear Reader,

Romance is the pursuit of love. It brings happiness, joy, challenges and growth to every day we walk this planet. Thank you for joining me and my characters on their journey to find love. In my stories you will find a love story that will leave you with a feeling that love, however unexpected, does always conquer all.

Unexpected Love Reading Order:

She Ruined the Marquess

A Lord's Redemption

The Mistress Match

A Dance with the Duke

His Heart for the Holidays

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Montgomery Bohart prowled his opulent office, a tiger trapped in an ironclad cage. Every so often he paused, raking impatient hands through his dark red curls. His steward, the ever-ready, ever-patient John Styles, sat perched in a chair against the dark paned windows.

John's light eyes were wide, staring at the tiny creature who had taken up residence upon Bohart's solitary sofa. If it were any other situation, Bohart would've chuckled at the man's fearful expression. After everything he'd put his steward through, it turned out that the one thing that undid the man was a girl child.

Typically, the lush sofa was neatly covered with tasseled, decorative pillows and an assortment of comfortable blankets, all selected by John, in an effort to cozy up the space for Bohart. That couch was a makeshift bed for the many nights, or hell, many days, that Bohart had to grab a quick rest without going up to his apartment above the Blue Fiver social club.

Currently, the pillows were tossed in a sporadic pattern across the worn wooden floors. In their place sat a tiny girl, her curls a frenzy of golden hair. Curious blue eyes, lit by interest, watched her uncle wear a path into the floor.

Bohart turned to the child, his only niece, dropping to her eye level in front of her knobby, stockinged knees. His own groaned slightly at the unfamiliarity of the pose. Gently he pulled her tiny hands into his own.

We will try one more time, he promised himself, then he would let it go for today.

"Abigail, do you know where your mama is?"

Bohart tried to dampen his voice. He was far more accustomed

to shouting out directions and charming gentility than coercing a small child to answer his questions. His bold tone and frankness of speech had set the child to tears in the past simply by speaking to her. With relief, she didn't seem as startled by him as she had in past visits.

Abigail looked around the office, her delicate hands twisting against her uncle's firm palms. At three, she was usually quite the talker. That made her silence even more troublesome to Bohart. The child hadn't spoken since she had appeared alone at the back door of the Blue Fiver, her mother nowhere to be found.

Bohart had acted immediately, sending out his people to search the streets for his twin sister, Martha. By the end of the day, the reports that filtered into Bohart only fed the ache of dread that had settled over his body. Martha was gone, and no one knew where she could've been. With a growl, Bohart had called his people back to the Fiver, swearing that he would do anything possible to secure her safe return. But in the meantime, he needed to protect his niece as well.

He stared into Abigail's face, so much like his sister's, willing her to speak to him. He wouldn't consider himself a stranger to the child, he had been a part of her life since before she was born. But at the same time, he had always kept her at a distance. He hadn't always been the clean-cut businessman he was now. There were only a few ways that a low-class orphan made his way into the upper tiers of society, and he had toured them all.

It had paid off though, he was now an owner in the most prestigious, elite social club in all of London. It meant working all day, every day, and most of the night. His life was not for the faint of heart, and not one for a child or his beloved sister. Bohart reminded Martha of this fact every chance he could, which made his niece's appearance at the club even more shocking.

From the moment Abigail had been brought to his rooms, Bohart had been terrified for his sister. She would never have abandoned her child willingly. He was hoping that the child would open up to him soon and that there was an answer for where her mother had gone. The realist in him told him that it would never be that simple. Not for him. Not with Martha.

Martha had never settled into life, her soul restless and whimsical. When he had met Abigail's father, Bohart had worried that

it wouldn't last. And it hadn't. Shortly before his niece was born, she had shown up at his door, heavily pregnant and lost for words. Martha was too smart to have ever let her hot-tempered older brother meet the man that was Abigail's father, which was probably the reason the man was still alive.

Bohart had welcomed Martha and her unborn baby into the safety of his life, for as long as he could. He and his twin were different in every way, they had always been a united front, each completed by the other's presence.

While she stayed with Bohart, Martha had worked for the club, only during the day, and when he had his best people on duty to make sure she was never in any danger. Most importantly, he quickly spread the news that she was in fact, his sister. That alone kept everyone from approaching her. He was not a man to be trifled with, especially not in his club.

By the time Abigail was born, he had helped them find a cozy, safe apartment within walking distance from the Blue Fiver. Martha worked in the kitchens when she could, the rest of the time she spent devoted to her daughter.

The same little girl who now stared at him with those huge, sorrowful blue eyes. Silent. Hurt.

Bohart's chest filled with a desire to act, and his frustration at now knowing what to do must've shown across his face, since Abigail leaned back a bit, away from his imposing form. One of the downfalls of his fair skin and red hair, he always looked just a bit angry, to begin with. Throw in this deep frustration and no wonder the child was looking at him so carefully.

Martha didn't share Bohart's fiery hair, hers was a rich shade of inky black that emphasized the lovely lines and strength of her face. Abigail however, had not escaped the family's genetics. Her strawberry blonde curls showed signs of deepening red as she grew from infant to child.

Bohart squeezed her fingers gently, his attempt at comforting her falling far short, he knew. They felt as delicate as songbirds in his grasp. Forcing a smile to his lips, he turned to John.

"John, didn't you say that Peggy is making breakfast for the

boys downstairs? I think she said something about fresh muffins.”

This time Abigail did flinch slightly at the volume of his voice but didn't pull away entirely. Bohart stayed still, waiting for the child to relax again. John stood behind them, his face confused as he tried to read his employer's expression.

Bohart looked at him over one broad shoulder. He let his smile fade. “Muffins, John, muffins.”

John immediately lurched forward, scooping up a pile of correspondence from the desk as he hurried to the door.

“Yes, of course. I'm sure we can get you some of those muffins, sir.” John slipped from the office, his silver mustache stiff as he sought out the kitchens in the basement below.

Bohart peaked back at his niece. If there was one thing he did know, it was that the child loved baked goods. He routinely sent over a wide selection of treats to the apartment her and her mother shared. Peggy, the Blue Fiver's kitchen manager and chef, was an incredible baker. He hoped the sweets would bring a smile to Abigail's timid face, even if it were only for a moment.

Bohart nodded, slowly rising from his crouched position. His knees cracked and he grimaced a bit. Abigail didn't move, her curious eyes had followed John's path out of the room. Now that they were alone, she stared at Bohart with open and obvious interest.

Those wide eyes, so much like his sisters, tugged at his heart.

No matter what was going on with his sister, Bohart knew when he needed to step up. He reached out, brushing his hand along one side of her curls. Only the briefest touch of affection, but more than he had shown anyone for a long time. The feeling was raw, uncomfortable. He resisted the urge to check around the room to see if anyone else had witnessed it.

They were utterly alone.

But only for a few moments. Loud, quick footsteps alerted Bohart to the arrival of one of his most trusted advisors. Peggy Sullivan, his kitchen manager and head chef, barged into the office without knocking. She was one of few who could get away with such

actions, and even so, Bohart rolled his eyes at the dramatic woman's entrance. With her steel-grey hair and sharp gaze, she ignored Bohart and flew to Abigail's side.

Fluttering over the little girl, murmuring, Peggy quieted the nervous energy of the room. A grandmother herself, she fussed over Abigail for a few moments before revealing a small package of goods that she had brought up with her. Within moments Abigail sidled up to the older woman, staring at her with open adoration. Jealousy made Bohart fidget in his chair, but he stayed silent. He put a significant reminder across his desk to give Peggy an exceedingly large bonus this holiday season.

It was obvious the child was more content now, with Peggy here, than she had been the entire day yesterday. He wished he had thought of calling for her before now. Last night had not gone well, he had been out late checking the area for any sight of Martha. That left Abigail in his apartment alone with one of his trusted footmen from the club. The child had thrown herself at Bohart when he returned and insisted upon staying up half the night, clinging to her only relative as he read through the depressing reports about Martha's continued absence.

No one had gotten any sleep, and he felt it now. His eyelids may as well have been lined with sand as he stared at the two of them. For a long moment, he considered asking Peggy to take the girl home, somewhere she'd be more relaxed, but memories of last night, of her little body holding him so tightly forced him to shake his head.

No, his niece would stay with him, as long as she needed him. He would figure something out.

Peggy was comfortable there, sharing her treats with Abigail so Bohart busied himself in the next hour, pouring over the accounting details from the club. While as a child he had resisted any type of education, he had a natural and easy way with numbers. Other than his sharp tongue, Bohart assumed that it was his quick, business savvy mind that had allowed him to climb into the role he had now, as the operator of the Blue Fiver club.

One of the Blue Fiver originals, Lord Stewart Fletcher, had been looking to step down from his role as operator, to fill his chair at the table with new, fresh blood. He had found that in Montgomery Bohart. It hadn't taken much to convince Bohart to make the leap into

a world of glamor, gambling, and titles, where the greatest currency available was information.

The pair had spent the better part of a year together handing off Fletcher's tasks as operator of the Blue Fiver. Bohart had been Fletcher's shadow, and slowly the olden man had gained his trust and admiration. In return, Bohart was a devoted worker, obsessed with proving himself to not only Fletcher but the other owners.

Bohart was used to being used. To being leaned on. The weight of their observation, their eyes, was nothing against the strain of his youth. They would not regret their decision to back him. For Marth, for himself, he dragged himself out of the filth and into the shining glamor of the London elite.

Fletcher had taken a step back, but he had struggled to disappear from the club forever. Fletcher remained a regular at the Fiver, a common sight across the rooms filled with the most powerful faces in London. When Abigail had shown up, but no Martha, it was Fletcher that Bohart sought out first.

The older man had more reach than Bohart ever would. It was not always about how much money you could throw at a problem. Bohart had plenty of money. It was often about making the right people aware of your needs. Fletcher knew plenty of the right people.

If there was anyone in all of London, other than himself, who could find Martha, it would be Fletcher. He was sure of that.

A small, sticky hand touched his side, causing him to startle in surprise. Biting down on the string of curses that threatened, Bohart turned to his niece. She had quietly hopped down from the sofa and come to stand by his desk chair. Weak tea delivered by John, with lots of milk for Abigail, plus fresh, steaming muffins had filled the little girl's belly. She had crumbs across her rosy cheeks, left over from the variety of muffins that Peggy had delivered.

Bohart had never been more grateful for the staff of the Blue Fiver than he was today. He was a tough employer, there was no doubt about that. But his devotion to his team was reflected in the respect and commitment of their own actions. This collection of servers, performers, footman, servants, maids, they were the first family Bohart had ever had, other than Martha.

Straightening his sleeves, he tried to smile at Abigail. She was now looking at him, her eyes heavy-lidded as she again reached out to tug at his side.

Bohart glanced around the room, hoping desperately for a sign of what she might need. He had no children of his own, and his experience with their care was severely limited.

Impatient, Abigail pulled at hand, sighing loudly. Realization hit him; she was tired. It was no wonder, the past day had been nothing but questions and strange places for her.

Before now, Bohart had always visited Martha's apartment, vowing that no child would ever set foot in his club. While he could guarantee the safety of his patrons, he would never wish to be responsible for child being in this environment.

Martha had rolled her eyes when he told her this, poking his middle with joking, accusing fingers. "What will you do when you have your children?" Her voice had been teasing, light.

"Simple. I will not be having any." Bohart had found pride in her disbelieving face. Slowly, her expression had turned to one of resigned sadness.

"I hope you change your mind someday. There is life outside of the club, you should try it out."

Bohart had never answered. And now, in an ironic twist, it was him who led Abigail up to the third floor of the club, where his apartment was. As the operations manager for the Blue Fiver, he had claimed the largest of the owner suites, nicknamed the Penthouse.

While there were rooms on this floor for the other owners, they rarely used them. All of the original five, besides Fletcher, had found themselves in the throes of domestic bliss.

Abigail followed, her little body pressed up against his leg as they walked. Her footsteps were nearly silent against the polished hardwood floors. As soon as he closed the door separating them from the landing, her hand dropped from his.

Wide, serious eyes examined his apartment. Nicknamed the Penthouse, this was the largest of all the owner suites. Two full

bedrooms, including his own, a full dining room, and a plush parlor where a fire crackled merrily in welcome.

Bohart watched the girl closely. He could count on one hand the number of times that he'd spent the night in the penthouse. He was far more likely to pass out on the sofa after a long night in the club.

He wasn't much of a drinker these days, but his role as the operator meant that was expected to be the on-site owner, in charge of the day-to-day activities. That meant everything from hiring dishwashers to charming the high-end gambling tables. It took a significant toll on his personal life. Watching Abigail, he tried to remember the last time he'd spent quality time with her or his sister. No wonder she was so tentative around him.

His heart hurt as she backed away from him. She didn't look frightened, simply overwhelmed at the plush, vast apartment that was laid out at her feet.

The penthouse, like the rest of his life, was a remnant from Fletcher's time operating the Blue Fiver. Fletcher had expensive taste, a product of his elite upbringing. While Bohart didn't necessarily dislike the apartment, it had never felt like home. Probably because he avoided it as much as possible. It would be too easy to get comfortable here, to sink into the plush and forget about his insatiable need to keep going.

Nevertheless, he knew that John kept the place clean, warm, and available for his master's every need. Taking a glance around Bohart opted to put Abigail into the bedroom next to the master, where Martha had stayed years before.

Leading the way, he strode into the room. Thankfully the fireplace was glowing with quiet heat. Abigail climbed happily onto the bed, curling on her side away from him. His heart wrenched.

This was so different from the smiley, bubbling little girl he had known before. Reaching down, he slowly took off her shoes. She didn't respond but watched her uncle as he cared for her. He couldn't bring himself to help the child get undressed, so he simply tucked the blanket around her fragile form.

"I've asked our maid to look in on you in the morning. I'll be

down in my office when you wake up, but she'll help you get dressed." A barely perceptible nod came from the bed. His throat tightened, and for a moment, he was afraid to leave her here.

Martha would've had the perfect thing to say to her daughter, to him. But she wasn't here.

Pressing his hand to her leg, Bohart straightened himself and went to the door, closing it as quietly as he could. Abigail didn't turn to watch him leave, and it hurt more than he expected.

Resisting the urge to pace the long hall, or to find solstice in the unended piles of work on his desk downstairs, Bohart tried to get comfortable. Pulling up a thick armchair he collapsed into it.

Where could Martha be? Desperation rose in his throat like bile. With a scared and helpless niece on one side of his life and a vivacious club on the other, Bohart knew it was time to ask for help.

The club he could handle in his sleep, acted as an extension of himself, as familiar as his own hands. But a child? Especially one he cared about like this one. That was outside his range of expertise. Snatching a section of paper from the nearby desk Bohart decided it was time to call in a favor.

TWO

Marian Wains had always loved the snow. It signaled the beginning of society's season in London and while she wasn't sure what that meant for her this year, there was something magical about the transformation that happened.

The girls who blossomed into fine ladies. The boys who suddenly looked far less like wobbly colts, more like the polished gentlemen they would be.

There would be tea sessions to catch up with friends, balls at the finest homes in all of England, not to mention the entertainment that came with watching the marriage market implode right in front of her.

For years Marian had played into the season with her friends. Gossiping about the available men, daydreaming of silken wedding gowns, and dancing her way across brightly lit countryside manors.

But something happened last year. Well, several things really. Perhaps it was her tale of unrequited love lost, but it seemed that her days of gracing the ton's events were lessening. Her friends were growing distant as they too found love; theirs, unlike hers, being the forever kind. The same kind they had dreamed of like girls.

Letters from them were a window to a world that seemed far away. Marian admitted that sometimes while reading them, a shimmering of tears would fill her blue eyes. Tears for the years lost pining for the wrong man. For a bridge she'd set flame to without even acknowledging it's fragility.

But now, that seemed like a distinct and childish dream from a girl who was practically an antique. At this point, she was going to be lucky if she married at all, she thought glumly, a sour expression

pulling at the delicate lines of her face.

At least this year she would have friends joining her for the season's events. Weeks ago, William Huntington, Marquess of Mansfield Park, had married the quirky, beautiful, and gentle soul that was Miss Juliet Sonders of Greystone.

They had decided to come into town after the New Year and allow some of the more significant renovations to William's historic estate to be completed without the restless honeymooners underfoot.

Marian thought back to their wedding, only a few weeks before. The adoration that had filled William's grey eyes when he saw his bride, would be enough to make Marian smile for months.

The Marquess had grown up alongside her older brother, Robert. In every way except for blood, William was her family. Seeing him endlessly happy, with her best friend no less, made Marian want to believe in real love. Maybe even for a second time.

The brightly lit sitting room was the most comfortable space in the entire Devonshire townhouse, and therefore her favorite. Tucked in the back of the home, nestled beside the kitchen, this is where Marian preferred to spend her days in town. Especially now that her sister Laura had temporarily taken over the front parlor with her friends.

Being the victim of three thirteen-year-old girls' surveillance and criticism was not something Marian was interested in pursuing. While Laura was a quiet, gentle young lady, her friends and she were consistently getting into trouble. Their favorite activity, above all, seemed to be questioning Marian about her absolute lack of prospects for marriage.

They had turned their eager, shining bright eyes up to her, begging her to tell them all her secrets to finding an advantageous husband. How to woo the fickle and ominous group that ran the gentility. However, as soon as Laura had explained that Marian was twenty-two and prospectless, they had turned on her like a hungry dog.

To be safe, she kept herself hidden to the back of the townhouse, trading her sister's company for the warm, flickering fireplace and the delicious smells that wafted through the room from

the kitchen. Whatever Greta was making today, it smelled like cinnamon and ginger.

The snow was piling up against the thick brick exterior of the townhouse. Marian sighed into the silence of her hiding spot. A creak in the floorboards above her head signaled that she wasn't the only one hiding.

Marian knew that her mother had seconded herself to the upstairs reading room, claiming a headache had driven her to the upstairs sanctuary. While she'd never admitted it, Lady Catherine was surely hiding from Laura and her excitable friends as well. Three spicy teenagers stuck in during a snowstorm were not a friend to anybody.

Closing her eyes, Marian took a deep breath, letting her mind fill with images of William and Juliet's wedding. The frosted glass of the tiny, historic chapel on Mansfield Park's rolling land. The way Juliet's dark eyes had sparkled with joy at seeing her groom. Their vows had been breathless, the both of them devouring each other with their eyes.

And that kiss. Marian had felt it from her chest to the tips of her toes.

She remembered what it felt like to be kissed like that. Like you were precious like the entire world would stop if you didn't have one more chance to be with that person. Marian swallowed hard.

Once upon a time, nearly four years ago now, she had snuck away from home to kiss Teddy Conning goodbye as he stood in the foggy, grey skies at the Port of London. As the second son of a financially struggling lord, Teddy had decided to take a commission and earn his way in the world as a soldier.

Their short time together had burned like a firework, hot, burning, and explosive. They met at one of Marian's father's events, a charity ball benefiting the London Orphan Society. Teddy had attended with his older brother, Edwin Conning, who would be the next Lord of Canterbury someday.

The minute Marian had spotted the sharp green eyes, and shock of dark brown hair, she had been drawn to Theodore Conning.

Teddy had been only a few inches taller than the petite

Marian. Compared to the burly, broad figure of her father and brother, Marian had loved being able to look straight into his eyes as they spoke.

Or rather, she had been able to watch the way his curving lips had smiled down at her. He was bold and full of laughter. By the time they parted that evening, Marian was in over her head.

Teddy pursued her as well, calling at the Devonshire townhome the next day. Throwing caution to the win, Marian had flown out of the house.

Once she had been proudly seated in the Canterbury rig, two high-stepping greys trotted off. Teddy had stared down at her with promise in his eyes, his lips pulling up on one side in what she now knew was his signature smirk. They had talked for hours until Marian's throat grew raspy.

Marian had felt her heart flutter when his gloved fingers had brushed against her arm, pleasure rippling down her body.

As with everything in town, the word passed quickly. By the time that Teddy said his sweet goodbyes in front of the townhouse, Marian's parents were waiting in the front parlor. They had risen as she waltzed in, glowing from the fresh air and sparks of romance.

Her father's words had been short, straight to the point. No *darling* of Devonshire would be marrying a second son, especially one whose family was struggling to make ends meet. Marian had never considered her dowry until that moment, looking into her father's pleading eyes and seeing his honest concern. He believed, like her mother, that Teddy was looking for an investment, not a wife.

Marin had hurled angry curses, foreign to her tongue, stomping through the house to hide in her room for days. Teddy's missives were ignored by her parents, and Marian thought it would be the last time she'd ever see him. But he had pressed on, seemingly desperate to see her too.

One day he bribed the kitchen girl to leave a note on Marian's afternoon tea. The next, a small ticket accompanied a pleading note for her to meet him. Humiliated by her father's words, driven by what she believed was love, she had gone straight into Teddy's waiting arms.

Yes, she had let him kiss her, let him hold her in the shadows of London's most exclusive residences. Thinking back Marian knew that the threat of being caught made every touch more remarkable, his touch burning against her virginal skin.

Touching her lips, Marian could still remember the heat. The unyielding passion that had driven her from her house time and time again. By the time two weeks had passed, Marian only had one priority in her life. To be with Teddy, to marry him. And she would do anything to make that happen.

One day, as they leaned against the heavy brick walls of a downtown eatery, Teddy said the words Marian had wished for most in the entire world.

"I've found a way for us to be together." His breathless voice had brushed against her neck, sending a thrill down her spine.

"What is it?" She had turned in his arms.

"I'm going to join the army. I'm strong, well-connected. In a few short years, I could be an officer, with a real-life ahead of me." His eyes had glazed over, deep in thought as she considered him.

"The army? I don't understand."

"Neither does my father, or my brother for that matter." His voice had been wistful. "But as an officer could provide a good life for you, for us." Marian had blushed, her fair skin coloring easily.

"How are you going to do it?" Marian had asked. Teddy gripped her shoulders in his narrow, strong hands.

"Will you help me? You will never have to worry about another thing in your whole life." Teddy's face had been serious, but the voice in her ears was pleading.

"How can I help you?" Marian hadn't understood his question.

"I need to buy a commission; it won't be much at all. I promise, Marian." Teddy had leaned in, pressing his eager lips against hers, silencing any questions, any concerns. By the time he pulled away, Marian already knew the money was his. Just like her heart

was.

“Mare, can you come here a minute?” Robert’s voice filtered down the hall, startling Marian from her memories. She hadn’t been aware her brother had returned from his office down by the port.

He took his new role in the company seriously, almost too seriously, spending long days and nights working on the family’s shipbuilding company. Sometimes he’d be gone for days before stumbling in exhausted, and unsure of the date.

It worried her, this side of him. Robert was completely devoted to proving himself to their father, even if it pushed him to his breaking point. Marian hoped that their father would be home soon and take on some of the workloads again. Even if it was temporary.

Walking into the plushy furnished library, which doubled as a workspace for Robert while he was here, Marian immediately noticed the sickly grey pallor of his skin.

“Is everything alright, Robert?” Marian moved familiarly to his side, draping a slender arm over his broad, tense shoulders. He was in his shirtsleeves, the cuffs rolled up to his elbows, despite the chill of the London weather. His fine Italian wool overcoat was thrown over a nearby sofa, and while it was only midday, a large pour of brandy sat within reach.

Rather than answer, he ran his hands restlessly through his close-cropped hair, the same shade of brilliant blonde as Marian’s. People claimed that the two of them looked more like twins than they did siblings. The same bright blue eyes, shocking blonde locks, and, of course, flawless Devonshire pedigree. Marian could’ve once claimed that the pair of them were the most influential, popular siblings in their generation.

But she’d ruined all that. She glanced at her brother though her eyelashes, wondering how his new mysterious relationship was going. After his botched engagement, and her own brush with ruin, the pair of them were enjoying a new type of popularity in the ton, the type that made their names fresh on every wagging tongue. Not in a flattering way. Robert didn’t seem to care, his focus, as always, sharp and direct.

Marian aspired to be like him, to let the whispers, the comments roll off her back the way he did. Maybe someday they

would. It seemed she would have plenty of time to practice. Marian snorted decisively, turning her attention back to her sibling's tight jaw, his habitual rolling of his knuckles. Placing her hand over his, she halted the action softly.

"It never ends, Mare. As soon as I think I've got one issue straightened, another lurks in its place. It's daunting, to be honest. Especially without Father here." Robert's eyes were wide, staring at the vacant chair beside his desk.

Marian shifted her weight, patting his shoulder affectionately, wordlessly understanding the pressure that had always been placed on them. Between their father, their mother, and society's sharp gaze, the Wains children knew what it was to be scrutinized.

"But that's not while I called you in here." Robert rolled his head back to look at his sibling. While he was sitting, they were practically the same height. The thought made Marian smile as she made herself comfortable.

"What is it then?" Marian stepped around until she faced him across the heavy desk, nonchalantly neatening the piles of papers and notes strewn across the top.

"Stop that. You're making me nervous," Robert scolded her, a frown settled across his handsome face. Marian rolled her eyes.

"Robert," she pleaded with him to continue.

"Okay, okay. Do you remember Mr. Bohart? William's friend from the Blue Fiver?" Robert's usually bright eyes were dim, bleak.

"I do," Marian said carefully, keeping her eyes on the mixture of ledgers and notes piled closest to her body.

But inside, her heart pounded. Of course, she remembered Montgomery Bohart, the immense redheaded club owner who had helped William in his quest to free her dear friend Juliet from an arranged marriage. Around London, he was known as a bit of a mystery, an orphan who clawed his way to his current position as an owner of the most elite, private social club in town.

She blushed slightly, remembering how Bohart had swept her off her feet after she had thrown a punch, her first ever, at the rotten

human being who had been attempting to marry Juliet.

Bohart had held her against the bulk strength of his body as he fled the room, depositing her safely away from the foray. Later, he had held her fine-boned hand in his calloused one, delicately wrapping the bruised flesh in clean white cotton.

His deep blue eyes had twinkled as he explained that next time, she punched anyone, she needed a tight, closed fist. He had closed his hand around hers, demonstrating. She had been sure he could've heard her heart pounding in her chest, her body humming at the sharp awareness he awoke in her.

Yes. She remembered Montgomery Bohart.

"He wrote to me this morning, back in London and in desperate need of help." Robert looked up at her, picking up the brandy and swirling the glass with practiced ease.

"With the club? Isn't Father already a member?" Marian pursed her lips, closely observing her brother's behavior.

"No, not with the club. I can't imagine him needing much help in that area. This is a much more personal request." Robert was looking more and more uncomfortable. Marian was intrigued.

"Go, on," she urged.

"Bohart's sister has disappeared, leaving his three-year-old niece alone. She's too young for boarding school, and Bohart can't find a governess who wants to be associated with him."

Marian wrinkled her nose. Sometimes their world was a cruel place. "Because of his upbringing?"

Robert mimicked her, wrinkling his nose. "I guess so. More than likely too nervous to be associated with a gentlemen's club."

"People are ridiculous." Marian shook her head, feeling the loosening pins holding her fine blonde hair in place. She reached a hand back to reset them, giving her brother an incredulous look.

"Yes, but that doesn't change the situation. The girl can't be left alone, especially over the holidays." Robert suddenly dropped his

gaze, staring at his lap.

“And, Robert? What does this have to do with me?” Marian prodded.

“He asked William and Juliet if they knew of a companion who would be willing to come work for him temporarily. At least through the holidays.” Marian raised her blonde brows. There was a distinct and painful tightening of her chest.

“For the girl’s sake,” Robert finished softly.

“And you all thought of me?” Marian almost choked on the words.

She had known for years that if she didn’t get married that she would need to consider her options for her future. With her background and education, she had always kept governess, or companion, on her list of possibilities.

But hearing these words, especially from her older brother, hurt more than she expected. While she had resisted any serious attempts at courtship over the past year since her relationship with Teddy had ended, the feeling of actually being put on a shelf was deeply unsettling. Her future, the one she’d always pictured seemed so far out of reach now. Having her own husband, her home, a family to cherish like the one she grew up in. While it had dimmed during the scandal with Teddy, the real possibility of that dream coming true was slipping through her fingers.

Robert’s voice was gentle, “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, Marian. Juliet mentioned how much you loved children.”

Marian nodded, her eyes swimming with salty tears. Sniffing, Marian reined in her emotions, swallowing down any chance at breaking down in front of her sibling. She refused to cry in front of Robert, he had always hated when she cried, even when they were young children.

“I will think about it. It’s not like I have a season to prepare for,” Marian’s voice shook with obvious dejection. Robert stood quickly; his handsome face somber as he moved to come around the desk.

She cursed, most unladylike, as she was enveloped in one of his hugs. She hadn't hidden her tears quickly enough.

Robert's towering body wrapped completely around her. Whereas she was constantly chilled, Robert gave off heat like a steam engine. She leaned into his chest; her head barely able to reach his collarbones.

"I've never thought differently of you, Marian. But if I could do anything to buy you back the time you lost. You know that, right?" Robert's voice was a deep rumble as he held her tightly.

Marian closed her eyes, letting the hot tears slip down her cheeks. Even hearing Robert discuss Teddy still hurt. How was that possible after a year? She wondered to herself. Perhaps it was because she could vividly remember every second, every detail of her brief time with him.

Marian had stayed devoted to Teddy, even after he left London for training and his run of assignments. They exchanged dozens, maybe hundreds, of letters over the two years that followed. Teddy rose in the ranks quickly, exactly as they had dreamed. In his letters, he told her about all the plans that he held for both of them. Marian devoured every word, every letter she received.

With only weeks before he was due to return to London, the letters suddenly stopped coming. Marian assumed that he had been ill, or perhaps busy, and hadn't gotten a chance to put pen to parchment. Her faith in him was unwavering.

On the day of his return, she had shown up at the docks in her favorite dress, the deep blue fabric billowing around Marian's form as she stood on the pier. The sharp breeze bit into her eyes as she waited impatiently for her Teddy to arrive.

Officers had come running down the pier, swooping in to twirl their spouses, squealing children, around them. The family returned to the family. The reunions were enough to bring tears to Marian's eyes, and she prayed for Teddy to be the next one to appear onshore.

Teddy had been the last to leave the boat, his stiff uniform gleaming in the rare English sunlight. Marian's heart had skipped a beat as he set foot on London ground. His face was more mature, more handsome than even she had remembered. Marian had begun to run

to him, picking up her skirts as she pushed her way through the crowds.

Before she reached him, his eyes had turned back to the plank, offering a hand to a dark-haired beauty. The woman stepped down alongside him, letting her fingers curl possessively around Teddy's. In a move both practiced and casual, Teddy had bent down to kiss her lips.

Marian had felt like the Earth itself had opened beneath her slipped feet as she stuttered to a halt. Teddy's green eyes drilled into hers as he brought the strange woman's fingers to his lips, the softness of his mouth closing around a wedding ring that sat proudly on her left hand. The shock had frozen her to the spot.

Together, Teddy and his wife had passed by her as if she were a stranger. She had given up almost three years of her life, loving and pining for a man who never really existed. At least nowhere other than her dreams.

Teddy had most assuredly not waited for her. Not with this glowing young bride on his arm. Robert had been the one to find her hours later, crouched on the dark pier, her body still shaking in betrayal.

After a moment, Marian pushed against the wall that was Robert's chest. He had never forgiven himself for letting Teddy into her life, no matter how many times she had promised him that it was her own doing.

"I'm fine. Really. I want some time to think it all over." Marian stepped out of Robert's arms. He looked at her quizzically, nodding in response.

"Alright, now, get out of here. I've got work to do," Robert jerked his head at the door.

"Please don't get too buried in here. Mother will want to see you at some point." Robert nodded already distracted, his face immersed in a pile of ominous-looking reports. Marian sighed and left the room quietly.

THREE

Marian braced her nerves as she wandered to the front of the townhome, knowing someone needed to check in on Laura and her gaggle of visiting friends. Peeking her head around the arched doorway, her eyes immediately found her sister, curled up in the chair closest to the fire, nose in one of her novels.

The room was warmly lit, Laura's friends sat neatly on the sofa as she read aloud to them. They glanced at her, laughing at a particularly clever part of the story.

"Everyone alright in here?" Marian said softly, barely daring to disturb the group.

Laura looked up slowly, smiling cheerfully at her older sister. Where Robert and Marian shared the blonde, fair features of the family, Laura had burnished brunette hair and a smattering of freckles across her pert nose. Intelligent, sharp blue eyes graced a pretty face still rounded by lingering childhood.

"Yes, Miss Marian, thank you," one girl said, her wide brown eyes peering curiously up at Marian.

"Well, then I will see you at dinner, girls." Marian turned to make her escape.

"Lady Marian, did I hear that Mr. Bohart is coming for breakfast tomorrow?" The first girl spoke again, her voice bold and steady. Marian fought back the desire to laugh.

"Eavesdropping, ladies?"

All three of them blushed in silence.

“Yes, Mr. Bohart will be by to discuss some business matters.” Marian nodded at them and hurried from the room. The sound of giggles and hushed whispers followed her out down the hall and back to her hiding space.

“You know what they call him?” One of the girls whispered loudly. “Montgomery No-Heart. Because he’s all cold and serious all the time.”

Marian paused. She’d not heard his nickname before. It conflicted so much with the man who had come to the rescue of her dearest friend. The man who had taken care of her, even if it had only been for a few moments. Marian believed she’d seen emotion there, deep and conflicted as he’d held her.

Raising her chin, Marian decided then and there, she’d find out exactly what Montgomery Bohart was made of.

Marian would be lying if she hadn’t taken special care when she got ready this morning. Her family’s lady’s maid, Alice Sams, stopped by her room first thing that morning to see if Marian needed any help getting dressed. Typically, she preferred to get ready on her own, or with the occasional assisting hand of her sister.

But today was not typical. Marian had gladly brought Alice in to set some of the final, stubborn curls. As Marian sat silently, Alice tucked in the final curl against one bright pink cheek.

Marian looked at her reflection in the mirror, pressing her cool hands against her face. Why must her pale skin always give away her emotions so easily?

Her thoughts must’ve been clear, since Alice, a tall, sturdy woman in her thirties, pressed a quieting hand to her shoulders.

“You look lovely, ma’am.” A slight curtsy and the dark-haired woman quickly disappeared from her room.

“You are being a fool,” Marian spoke out loud to the anxious blonde woman in the mirror. Montgomery Bohart was only a man. A man with possible employment for her.

However temporary, it was time that Marian saw more of the world than the posh surroundings that were her every day. She had a distinct feeling that Bohart would expose her to all that and all.

She flushed again, thinking of how she had felt in the strength of his arms. Safe. Cherished. In the year since Teddy's return as a married man, Marian had felt like nothing but a fool. That day, against Bohart's body, staring into his tan, handsome face, Marian had felt something new blossom in herself.

Standing smoothly, Marian gave her reflection one last glance, affirming that everything was neatly in place. Sliding her hand down the gleaming banister, she descended to the ground floor. Head held high; Marian went to the back parlor to find the rest of her family. The pale London morning light poured into the back parlor illuminating the soft yellow painted walls.

Deep navy couches sat alongside a beautifully tiled mantle place where a mirror reflected the sharp, intelligent gaze of her mother. Lady Catherine Wains of Devonshire stood fireside, completely still, her timeless elegance as much a part of this luxury as the brocade curtains and gilded portraits.

"Good morning Marian," the matriarch of the Devonshire estate did not mince words, yet her greeting today was amiable than usual. Marian resisted the urge to narrow her eyes at the statuesque older woman.

"Good morning mother." Marian moved to her favorite spot in the room, adjusting a tasseled pillow before sitting on the couch. Once settled, Marian smoothed the fabric of her day dress, a high-necked shade of slate grey which she believed brought out the stormy blue in her eyes.

She had told herself a dozen times that morning that she wasn't dressing to impress anyone. But still, she hoped he would notice. The last time she'd seen him had been William and Juliet's wedding and she'd been too shy, too afraid to approach the club owner.

Robert marched into the room, shrugging into his forest green waistcoat as he walked. Marian smiled at her older brother. Tugging on an impeccably tied cravat, Robert grimaced at her in reply.

“Rough night?” Marian scooted to the side, offering her sibling a place beside her. Robert dropped his heavy form down into the couch beside her. She fought the urge to giggle as her usually prim and proper brother slouched into the cushions beside her.

“You could say that.” Robert flung a heavy arm over his face, leaning back. Marian snuck a look at her mother, who stared at her oldest. Marian wondered if this woman he was seeing had anything to do with his current state of wear. A smile tugged at her lips, her brother would tell them when he was ready. Until then, Marian and her mother would continue to pretend they were as ignorant as he thought they were.

“And that gives you the right to sit there grumping on my couch? Straighten up Robert, your friend will be here any minute.” Catherine’s voice, as usual, snapped Robert to form. She swirled across the parlor to look out the street-facing windows of the adjoining dining room.

“Well, since you’ve asked so kindly,” Robert muttered under his breath, tugging at his sleeves. He turned somber blue eyes to Marian, “You look very nice today.”

“Thank you. As do you.” Marian bumped his shoulder with her own. A show of solidarity.

“You aren’t upset with me then? For yesterday and all of this?” Robert waited for her response; his lips pulled thin.

“No, never. I know why you asked. Why Juliet and William thought of me. In all honesty, it might be a good fit for me. Perhaps I should spend a little time outside the shadow of Devonshire.”

“Just not too far, though, little sister.” Robert’s worried voice made me smile.

Suddenly, Lady Catherine turned with a clatter and hurried across the space. A wild-looking smile was on her usual demure face as she came to rest back by the mantle. Slowly placing her hand on the edge, her fingers gracing across the engraved edges. Posing, positioning herself for optimum view of both the foyer entryway.

Marian’s jaw dropped and a giggle threatened in her chest. Her mother seemed *frazzled* by their guest. Looking at her brother, both

siblings shrugged as if agreeing on the overall oddness of this morning.

Marian heard the deep, hushed tones of men speaking in the hall. Bohart must be here. A tang of nerves flooded her mouth, even as her belly clenched in anticipation. In the weeks since the wedding, perhaps she had exaggerated the man's effect on her. That had to be it.

A Devonshire footman strode into the parlor, causing Marian and Robert to stand in greeting. The footman announced Bohart, his cool voice filling the room.

"A Mr. Montgomery Bohart, at your service." The footman turned quickly and left the space. Marian didn't notice, her eyes were clinging to the statuesque man who had entered the room.

Thick, auburn curls were tamed by a bit of pomade, brows that were straight, serious, and low as he took in her family through his scrutinizing gaze. An angular jaw finished the face that Marian had been dreaming about since she first met him months ago. And now he was here, filling up the parlor with his imposing body.

Marian's body didn't know what to do with this imagery. Her mouth was dry as a bone, yet heat dripped down my spine, coming to rest below her belly where she clenched her thighs together.

No, her mind had not exaggerated a single aspect about Bohart. If anything, she had dimensioned him over time. The man himself was much headier, his body radiating a sort of confidence that Marian was immensely attracted to.

"Mr. Bohart, so pleased you can join us for breakfast." Catherine offered a brief curtsy, which Bohart returned with a bow.

Rising, his wide mouth curved into a smirking smile. "Lady Catherine, I appreciate you making it sound more like a social visit, and less like a cry for help."

To her surprise, her mother colored up, a faint pink coloring her fair-skinned face as she stared up at the club owner. Marian's mouth fell open. Was her mother blushing? The thought itself shocked her. Even more so when she looked at Robert to see his brow furrowed, head tilted slightly.

Lady Catherine was the picture of propriety. In all areas of her life, she demanded a level of decorum. Yet here she was, practically canoodling with the charming Mr. Bohart, who by no fault of his own, would never be considered a part of the *ton*.

Before she had a chance to properly process any of this knowledge, Bohart stepped forward to grip Robert's hand.

"Wains, good to see you." Bohart's voice was low, rumbling. Marian wondered if anyone else felt the vibrations from his voice in her body. Maybe it was her. She focused hard on keeping her breathing even, calm. It was getting more difficult at the moment.

Especially when she realized that while Bohart held her brother's arm, his eyes were on her face. The moment their gazes met, she felt her body tighten as if every inch of her body was suddenly exposed to the sharp winter air.

Marian watched as a Bohart seemed to curse something, or somebody silently. He turned to her, reaching a handout for hers. She offered it, continuing to focus on the steady breathes she was taking, rather than the pounding heart in her chest.

"Miss Wains, I appreciate you meeting with me."

Marian's brows must've gone skyward. That was the last thing she was expecting him to say. He was acting as if this meeting were strictly between the two of them. Glancing side to side, she noted that her mother had moved into the dining room.

Tilting her head back to him, Marian surveyed Bohart's face. It was earnest, open, intriguing.

"Of course, Mr. Bohart." Marian barely got the words out before a sharp rush of pleasure washed over her. His lips were on her hand, brushing over the fine skin. While many gentlemen had kissed her in such a way, Marian didn't remember ever having such a visceral reaction.

He smiled as if he knew the effect he was having, which made the situation even worse. Pulling her hand from his grasp, Marian stepped back. She might not dare to narrow her eyes at her mother, but Mr. Bohart was a different matter.

“Marian, Mr. Bohart, I’m afraid that Robert and I are going to have to step out for a moment,” Catherine turned to Mr. Bohart, “My youngest is taking her breakfast upstairs with some visiting friends. It’s not always best to leave them alone for too long.”

Robert stalked slowly past Marian, brushing a hand over Bohart’s broad shoulder. Marian knew her mouth was open again, incredulous.

“Robert?” Marian growled out her sibling’s retreating. He threw a grin over his shoulder, following their mother out of the room. The soft creak of their footsteps signaled that suddenly the two of them were quite alone.

Marian dragged her eyes back to Bohart, noticing that he was already staring at her with rapt attention. Probably waiting for her to kick him out. Throwing her head back, Marian pulled herself up. She was a grown woman, an educated one. She was more than capable of discussing this opportunity with Mr. Bohart. Alone.

“Won’t you sit down, Mr. Bohart?” Marian gestured behind him to the waiting dining room. A small buffet of breakfast items lined the center of the table with a glistening ham as the centerpiece, several slices already carved from one side.

Bohart moved into the room easily, and while staff meandered throughout the townhouse, he moved to slide her chair back for her himself. Marian hurried to seat herself. The gesture was surprising, and quite honestly more thoughtful than she had expected from the gruff man.

Bohart tucked her seat in and quickly moved around to sit facing her. Neither moved to put food on their plates. The silence was palatable. Twiddling with his fork, Bohart avoided her eyes, his gaze flitting about the sage green walls to the row of portraits on the wall behind her. Anything but look at her.

“Mr. Bohart, if you’d like to tell me about this opportunity? I understand it’s your niece that is looking for a companion.” Marian’s voice was gently prodding, her lips quirking up as Bohart finally fixed her with his wide blue gaze.

“Ah yes. Of course,” Bohart carefully placed his fork back on

the table linens. "My niece, Abigail, has recently become my ward. Only until her mother returns. It is of the utmost importance that she is offered the best of everything in this life." His gaze dropped briefly to the elaborate plate in front of him. "I know you know who I am. It is no secret that I struggled for food, for shelter. But I want more for my family. That begins with Abigail."

Marian nodded, a tender smile on her face. "You must love her very much."

Bohart's face tightened, his body reacting as if she had cursed at him. Marian reached her hand across the table, worried. "Did I say something wrong? I meant no offense."

Bohart shifted his shoulders, the wool of his overcoat stretching over those broad shoulders. "No, no, nothing you said. I haven't been the most supportive uncle until recently. Acting as more of a sponsor than a true family member."

He held her gaze, the pain and worry in those eyes tugging at her soul. "I don't let people in easily. And in this case, I believed my niece would be better off held at a distance. Now my actions have put us both at a loss." He was silent for a long moment.

"She hasn't spoken since she arrived at the Blue Fiver. And that was two days ago."

Marian peered at him. "How old did you say she was?"

"She's three, which is exactly why that worries me. The last time I saw her, I couldn't get her to stop talking. Now I can't temp her into a single word. And I've tried everything."

Marian looked pensive, her fingers swirling onto the white linen. "May I ask what happened to her mother? Perhaps the child is suffering some trauma concerning how she came to be at your club?"

Bohart was nodding along with her words, his face was grave. "My people are sweeping all of London, we will find out what happened to Martha. I can promise you that." His last words were a growing threat. Marian's stomach clenched at his rasping tone.

The man was used to getting his way. Yet, Marian understood. If Robert or Laura disappeared, she would tear the world apart to find

them. His family was everything.

"I'm sure you will, Mr. Bohart. And in the meantime, it sounds like what your niece needs are a combination of nursemaid and governess."

"That seems about right," Bohart answered quietly, his eyes held hers captive. Heat stirred in her belly. As foreign and distracting as the overwhelming urge to move closer to him. She dug her toes into the floor, willing herself to remain still, ladylike.

"I would be interested in meeting Abigail and allowing her to get to know me as well. Perhaps I can be of help until you can bring her mother home to her." Marian smiled at him, her heart was pounding in her ears, practically deafening her.

Bohart's handsome face split in an enormous grin, transforming his gruff, dangerous expression into something that took her breath away. The man was divine.

"I'd appreciate that very much, my lady." Bohart's tenor was filled with hope, relief.

"It's Marian," she blurted out. Another slow smile curled across his face. Slow enough that Marian had enough time to fall in love with the way his eyes gleamed at her.

"Marian. I appreciate you taking the time." Bohart tapped both his hands on the table, his energy barely contained. "I will speak with Abigail this evening and perhaps we can meet tomorrow?"

"I would like that very much," Marian answered honestly, her face coloring under his smile. Bohart rose from the table, his chair squeaking lightly against the floor. He hurried around the table to pick up her hand.

Bohart finally paused, his lips only a breath from her skin. "I will see you tomorrow. Marian." In a flash of buckskin trousers, Bohart strode from the room. He never touched a bite of the feast laid out in between them. Once he had his answer, he had been gone in a flash, leaving Marian aching for more.

With one hand, she brushed her fingers across the knuckles he had kissed. Not once, but twice. Why did they still tingle?

Marian laughed to herself, reaching out to snatch a slice of ham off the plate. Thinking she was alone, she slouched back in her seat, taking a large bit of the salty protein and grinning.

“Is he gone already?” Catherine’s voice nearly set her from her chair, the shock sending Marian flying.

“What? Mama - how did you get down here so quickly?” Marian was coughing, the ham caught halfway between throat and airway.

“Oh, come now dear, when a man like that calls on your daughter, you never actually leave them alone.” Catherine strolled into the room, a knowing smirk on her face.

Marian was having another coughing fit. Staring at her mother through tear-filled eyes.

“Do calm down, Marian,” Catherine casually took Bohart’s now-vacant seat, staring at her daughter with bright eyes. “Now, tell me all about it.”

“His niece is three and is in dire need of someone to help care for her until her mother returns.” Marian placed her ham on her plate and tried to demurely slice into the remaining portion.

“Marian, please. I knew all of that before that man walked into our home. I need to know about the rest!” Catherine leaned forward eagerly. Marian’s brows rose.

“The man, Marian, the man. You can’t possibly be that blind.”

That surprised a laugh out of Marian. Settling back in her chair, she cast a glance around. They seemed to be alone. Taking a long, rickety breath Marian pressed a hand against her hot cheeks.

“No, Mama, I am not blind. Mr. Bohart is something else. He seems like he is a kind, good man, beneath a rough exterior.” Marian blushed, puckering her lips as she looked at her plate.

“I heard about what he did for you at Greystone when you took a swing at that nasty Lord Farber.” Catherine quirked a single silver brow. “Seems quite romantic if you ask me.”

“He was simply doing what any man would’ve in the situation. I don’t think it correlates to any other feelings for me if that’s what you are thinking.” Marian was incredulous. Where was her mother’s mind at?

“Oh, that is exactly what I’m thinking. Handsome, young, wealthy, and looking for a way to validate his family in the face of the London elite. He swoops in and happens to rescue the beautiful damsel in distress. Very interesting if you ask me.” Catherine took a meaningful bite of fruit.

“Mama, it wasn’t like that. Please don’t worry.”

“Oh, I’m not worried. I think this is a lovely new game to play.”

Marian barely restrained the need to roll her eyes skyward. “Oh no, Mama, this is no game. This is my future I’m looking at.”

“Exactly.” Catherine grinned at her daughter.

FOUR

Bohart stepped out of the hansom cab and strode quickly through the double doors of the Blue Fiver. A few of his boys, the muscle, you might say, nodded curtly to him. They were used to his coming and going. While there was a second entrance, around the side alley, that he typically used, today he needed to head straight to John's desk first. They had things to put into acting.

Slamming his hand down on John's desk, Bohart could barely contain his nervous energy. "John, John, take a note."

The man jumped from his chair, somehow procuring a pen and paper from the air as soon as he landed.

"Please write a note to Collins and ask him if we may have the use of his room for the next..." Bohart tilted his head, mentally calculating how long it might take him to secure a long-term caretaker for Abigail, "Let's say eight weeks. Tell him I'll throw in some tickets to the theater and whatever else it takes to convince him."

John was nodding profusely, his hands flying across the paper.

"I'll need to speak with the housekeeper, get that set up for whatever a caretaker might need. I imagine that Collins has it outfitted for his bachelor lifestyle."

"May I ask, sir, who will be residing in the Collins suite?" John's voice was placid, but the sharp glint in his eye betrayed his interest.

"I believe it will be Miss Marian Wains of --".

"--Devonshire, yes, very good sire. Excellent credentials, I'm sure." John said, still taking notes, his hand a blur.

Bohart's brow furrowed. "What do you know of the Wains family?"

"Devonshire is quite an old name, sire, that's all. I remember years ago that there were rumors of Miss Marian marrying the youngest Canterbury boy. It didn't come to fruition."

Bohart stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "I didn't realize. But good to know, I guess. Regardless, please see the housekeeper. I want to tell Abigail as soon as possible."

"I have everything I need. I'll bring up your breakfast soon."

Bohart grimaced, realizing suddenly that he had marched out of the Devonshire town home without so much as taking a bite of their vast breakfast display. His ears felt hot, and he wondered what Marian thought of his manners. Too late now, I guess, he thought to himself.

"Thank you, I'm starved." Bohart turned and disappeared up the stairs. He had a niece whose day he was hoping to make.

Marian had stressed, redressed, and tore her closet apart in advance of her solo meeting with Bohart and his niece. Catherine had offered a sympathetic ear, but was virtually useless, spending her time lounging on Marian's bed smiling as her usually demure daughter twirled around the room.

Finally, she was dressed, and arm-in-arm she descended the stairs with her mother, trying to ignore the way that Lady Catherine's lips pulled up in a knowing smirk. Reaching the base, a single, loud clunk of the brass door knock sent Marian's heart racing.

They were here. *He* was here.

Marian smoothed her dress with efficient, quick fingers, stepping into the arching doorway of the dining room. Catherine continued, turning from the room, her petite figure draped in an elaborate blue day dress that made her hair shine like polished silver.

For a moment, Marian considered calling back to her mother,

begging her to supervise her meeting. Catherine made an excellent buffer between Marian and whatever these feelings that crept over her every time Montgomery Bohart was near.

Yet, seeing her mother disappear down the hall, Marian felt the silent stroke of confidence. Her mother believed she was ready to handle this alone.

Be strong, she told herself, straightening her spine with a deep breath. Marian was determined that this was the start of a new beginning. One where she was her person, and this was her life and her decisions. No more hiding in the shadows. No more being afraid of what she wanted.

The footman showed Bohart into the foyer, and it was as if the air itself grew thin. Marian felt like she did when she accompanied Papa on one of his business travels to the Alps. Her head spun lightly; her chest tingled with heightened awareness. Pulling her tongue between her front teeth, she sucked on it to regain her focus, an old, but a comforting habit.

Bohart was dressed simply, but in every cut of fabric, every perfect thread spoke to his significant wealth. Maybe the man didn't carry a title, but the ease at which he stood in her family's luxurious townhome spoke volumes. He was not one to shirk from anybody, she could tell.

Following the length of his jacketed shoulder, the wool a deep charcoal grey, one of his huge hands was holding the tiny, delicate one of his nieces. Marian's jaw loosened with a soft noise of adoration; the child was lovely.

Her strawberry curls were pinned away from a round, cherub face that gazed into Marian's eyes with a seriousness far beyond her years.

All thoughts of propriety flew from her mind, and Marian found herself kneeling on their entryway rug, holding a gentle hand out to Abigail.

"Hello, Miss Abigail. I'm Marian Wains, a friend of your uncle."

The child tugged her hand free of Bohart's grip and reached for

Marian. She smiled, thinking that the little girl was going to shake her hand. Instead, the child reached up and touched a stray strand of Marian's curls with a sort of reverence that yanked hard at Bohart's already bruised heart.

Marian sat very still, letting the child feel her way around her twisted hairstyle. The girl shared her uncle's cutting blue eyes, and they carefully took in every part of Marian's face.

After she seemed satisfied with her analysis, Marian smiled widely at her. Bohart let out an audible sigh of relief.

"I think we will be fine," Marian whispered, more to herself than anyone else. Now that she had met Abigail, she knew what her answer to Bohart would be.

She would never be able to walk away from a child who needed help; she'd been a fool to even think she could. That said, she was glad to be handling this alone. The intensity of her mother's presence would be something they could work up to with Abigail.

Flickering her eyes up to Bohart's hovering form, "Would you like to come in for some tea?"

"Yes, of course, thank you." Bohart moved, stepping closer to her as he gently ushered the child forward.

To her surprise and pleasure, Abigail reached cool fingers out to slip them into Marian's hand.

She couldn't suppress the smile of joy as the little girl followed her through the dining room. Bohart's eyes were looking suspiciously misty as he watched his niece connect so honestly with the darling of Devonshire.

Marian led Abigail into the back parlor where a tea set was laid out for them. Abigail climbed gamely up onto the couch next to Marian and looked eagerly at the teacups. Laughing softly, Marian poured three cups and gave a generous pour of milk into the third, which she handed carefully to Abigail.

"Abigail, did your uncle tell you about who I am?" Marian said as she blew softly across the steaming beverage. The child continued to gaze at her with her wide, curious eyes. A slight quick shake of her curly head. Marian gave her a wide smile.

“Well, let me explain. I’ve been looking everywhere for a chance to spend the entire holiday with a special little girl. And your uncle had told me that you might be available to help me.”

Abigail was silent, her little brow furrowed. Marian pushed on.

“I was hoping to spend the holidays shopping for presents, decorating for Christmas, and visiting family. But since my little sister has gotten so big, she doesn’t want to do those things with me anymore.” Marian pulled her lips down into a sorrowful frown.

Abigail looked at her quickly, seemingly horrified.

“I’m not sure what I’ll do.” Marian took a loud, long sip of her tea, giving the child time to digest her statement. The hot liquid burned her tongue, but she clamped her mouth shut. Embarrassment heated her neck at her mistake.

A quick look at Bohart told Marian that he had caught both the gesture and the resulting burn. His handsome face was a mixture of humor and worry as ice blue eyes scanned her face for pain. Marian gave him a wary smile.

“I can help you.” Abigail’s hushed whisper may as well have been a scream for all that Bohart whipped back at its sound. He visibly flinched, quickly setting down his cup on the small lace-covered table between them. Quickly glancing at Marian, he caught her eyes and nodded quickly.

“Oh, you will? Abigail, I would enjoy that so much.” Marian grinned at the child, brushing a hand over her slender little arm. Glancing at her guest, Marian noticed that Bohart was also grinning at the child.

His smile stopped the breath in her lungs.

Abigail twitched her lip and took a quick slurp of her tea. After a beat, the girl finally answered, “Yes, I will.” Abigail turned to her uncle, pursing her lips at his carefully contained relief.

“Will Miss Marian be staying with us, Uncle Monty?” Abigail’s soft, high voice filled the space.

Marian’s eyes went wide, her jaw slack. She knew that it was a

valid question. If she didn't think so highly of Mr. Bohart, she would've sworn that the child had been prompted to ask such a question. But one look at his face, which had pale under the scruff of a red beard along his jaw, and Marian knew he was as surprised as she was.

Determined to keep this meeting on safe ground, she sat back for a moment, obviously considering her options. While Marian could easily stay home while working for Bohart, it wouldn't give the same experience as a true caregiver.

Abigail was only three, and from what she heard about Bohart, he didn't keep normal hours. Probably typically for a man who ran an establishment like the Blue Fiver, but different from what a child would be used to.

"Yes, yes, she will." Lady Catherine had reappeared, her voice steady and sure against the frantic pounding of Marian's heart.

Bohart looked between mother and daughter, at a very obvious loss.

Marian felt like her mind was reeling, her body swelled at the thought of sleeping feet from Montgomery Bohart. But also, the sweetness that filled the air when that innocent little girl had called him Uncle Monty. Her heart would never be the same.

Marian turned to look at Bohart. His face was tense, anxious for her reply.

"Yes, I will be staying with you, Abigail," she hastily added the girl's name to the end of her declaration. Internally she fumed. What magic did this man possess that turned her into this chattering monster.

Pure joy crossed Bohart's face, and it was echoed in the tiny Abigail, who clapped her hands.

"Now, would you like some more tea, Abigail." Catherine seated herself next to Bohart, her eyes trained on the child between them who nodded. "Ah, and perhaps some biscuits?"

"Mama, it is early for biscuits," Marian scolded softly as a maid seemed to appear from nowhere.

Catherine rolled her eyes, leaning to Bohart. "I might as well spoil this child, as neither of mine seems content enough to produce any grandchild for me to spoil."

Bohart smiled softly, his eyes catching hers in a gentle, intimate look. Her heart felt like it might jump right out of her chest as her eyes dropped to the fullness of his lips. Suddenly, insanely, she wondered what they felt like. They appeared so soft, plush. But on a man like Montgomery Bohart, there was no way anything about him was soft. Marian swallowed, forcing her eyes back to Abigail's.

Thankfully raising her cup to her lips broke the powerful pull between the two of them. Yet her body continued to hum with anticipation, with a deep yearning that made Marian wonder. What exactly had she gotten into?

FIVE

The next few days were a flurry of activity. But before Marian could think twice, she was standing in front of the Blue Five club with her brother. She squinted into the cold winter wind as she stepped out of Robert's shadow and up to the first step of the entry.

A thick, callus-looking gentleman stepped into her path. His frown gave her pause, even if she feared nothing with her brother by his side. While Robert was as blue-blooded as they came, she had seen for herself that he could pack a wallop of a hit when prompted.

"What's your business here?" came the rumbling question. Marian cocked her head sideways, staring up into the face of the larger man.

"We are here to meet with Mr. Bohart." Marian forced a sweet smile to her lips, but she couldn't be bothered to curtsy to the gruff man. Manners were best served to those who would appreciate them, and this man wasn't one of them.

"We?" His eyes crawled from Marian's form to Robert. She didn't need to turn around to know that Robert was bristling. The implication was enough to charge his blood for a week. Marian acted quickly.

"My brother, Lord Robert, and I are here to see Mr. Bohart's niece. I am to be her new companion." Marian pushed her voice through clenched teeth, lifting her chin as she spoke.

The man ran his hand along the smooth edge of his ponytail, looking conflicted.

"I haven't heard anything from my boss, but -" he licked his lips, "Come on in why we sort this out."

Robert stepped up to her side. Marian put a reassuring hand on his forearm. "That would be wonderful. Thank you?" She left the statement as a question, hoping to prompt an answer from the muscle. If she was going to be here for the better part of two months, it was her ambition to get to know everyone. Even the surly ones.

"Gerald. My name is Gerald." He looked almost bashful now as he ushered Marian and Robert into the front entry.

Once there, Marian realized that she was probably one of the very few women who had ever set foot in this establishment. On the first level, the club looked to be every inch as plush and luxurious as the price tag for membership would've expected.

There was a wide assortment of seating on the man level, and several large doorways that had looked to divide the rooms. The furthest from her view looked to be something of gambling space if she were to guess by the furnishings.

Through a sliver in the cracked door to the right, Marian could see a dark room with the dim, seductive lighting showing off a small stage. Performances must happen there, Marian thought to herself, blushing at the ideas that popped into her mind. She assumed that it was not a simple theater act that performed in this type of element.

Moving deeper into the foyer, Marian's lips curled into the beginnings of a smile. On the wall, in a large, engraved bronze plate she read.

Blue Fiver Men's Club, established in 1791.

Owned By:

Stewart Fletcher

Charles Hallsby

George Truett

Frederick Campbell

Montgomery Bohart

There was space below Bohart's name, probably for future owners who might eventually become a part of this successful business entity. It filled Marian's heart with something similar to pride as she stared at the swirling script of his name. An owner, at his age, and with his background was something to be proud of. She wondered if he understood how significant that was.

She ran a slender finger over the engraving of his name, her face leaning into the bronze plate. While she had known his first name before, there was something so deeply engrossing about seeing it in text, engraved for all to see on this building. Tracing the last of his name, she let her mouth open, forming the words.

“Montgomery Bohart,” she whispered to herself, barely audible. Her whole body leaped as she realized there was a second face reflected in the polished bronze. Twisting about, she turned straight into the solid wall that was Bohart’s chest.

“My friends used to call me Monty. I don’t suppose you’d like to as well?” Bohart’s voice was quivering with suppressed humor as she put two hands up and pressed lightly against his chest. Her mouth was slack, staring up into his handsome face.

“Mr. Bohart, oh my, I’m-,” Marian swallowed harshly, glancing about for her brother, “pleased to see you again.”

His eyes narrowed, but a strange emotion stirred in his eyes. Heat pooled in her belly as she realized how close they were, how the smallest steps would bring her flush against him.

She licked her lips. Bohart’s eyes followed her tongue, flew up to meet her stare again. He stiffened, stepping away. The movement was slight, but Marian felt the absence of his warmth instantly.

“I’m sorry if you had any trouble with Gerry. He’s new around here and hasn’t worked the front doors before. I should’ve prepared him better for your arrival.”

“It’s no problem, Mr. Bohart. We managed just fine.” Marian stepped back again, aware that her back was now firmly pressed against the ornate wall. She had nowhere else to go, trapped between the heat that was Mr. Bohart and the cool, harsh wall at her back.

She was not easily shamed. “Mr. Bohart, you are quite nearly holding me captive here. I don’t believe my brother is ready to see me in the arms of another man. Perhaps for both of our sakes, you can release me.”

She thought she heard Robert choke back a laugh, but when she peeked out from under Bohart’s arm, her brother’s face was of

trained disinterest as he took in his surroundings.

Bohart's face twitched in surprise. Either he was not used to being turned down, or he was not used to being spoken to as she had. Perhaps both.

Again, she did not shirk away from his frustrated gaze. She was a lady, she knew her worth, and was more than alright showing him exactly where her lines lay.

"Please do come in. Marian. Robert. My home is yours." Bohart gestured to the surrounding glamor. He stepped decisively away from Marian, leading their group up a set of stairs and into a comfortably furnished office.

Compared to the opulence of the floor below, this space felt relaxed and pleasantly lived in. Marian settled herself on a pleated sofa against one wall, her brother sat on the edge of a red upholstered chair.

For a moment, Marian wondered if her brother had been to the Blue Fiver before. Their father had been a frequent visitor to the club throughout their childhood but had never really offered to take Robert. In recent years the ongoing struggles with the country's economic and industrial upheaval had consumed every minute of their father's time.

Marian couldn't remember the last time her father had been able to spend time with his family. Between London's season and his work schedule, the man had been gone for as many months as he had been home. She hadn't seen him since summer.

Marian glanced at her sibling. Robert always claimed that he wanted to inherit the family company. That he wanted to be like a father, a businessman. But what kind of lifestyle would that be? He would have almost no chance to meet anyone. To fall in love. To be happy.

Anyone who knew the Wain's family knew that Lady Catherine was a powerful entity because she had needed to be. She had raised her children to be strong, valued spouses because she felt that she had not been prepared for the life she had married into.

Marian's heart ached thinking of it. And after everything, she

had ruined any chance of a marriage within the ton because of a silly infatuation with a money-hungry boy.

With a sigh, she watched Robert's face turn serious, businesslike. At least she had been allowed to fall in love. Robert has been trained for this future, with no other option ever presented. It was a bleak, lonely path, at least from her perspective. She didn't envy him.

Bohart had taken the high-backed seat behind a heavy mahogany desk. Moving some papers out of the way, he leaned forward on his elbows.

"Welcome to my home. Did you find everything to be in line regarding payment and contract?" Bohart looked straight at Marian, his face earnest.

She nodded, even as Robert uttered a quick, "Yes, your offer was most kind." Suspicion still rang in Robert's tone.

Bohart glanced at Robert before his stare stole back across the room to Marian's. "What you are offering to do far exceeds what I would've ever expected of a friend. I don't trust my family with anyone."

Warmth spread across her body, and she wondered if her ears were turning red. Had he just ignored her brother? His words, his eyes, were solely trained on her. Marian smiled tenderly at the man, feeling the weight of his words settle in her chest.

"I'm honored Mr. Bohart, I'm looking forward to this time here with you." Marian meant to specify that she was looking forward to spending time with his niece, but somewhere between her brain and her vocal cords, the words died out. She didn't bother redefining but hoped Bohart wouldn't read into the statement too far.

The sensual smile that pulled at his lips said that she was very wrong.

After some polite chatter, Robert stood awkwardly at the door of Bohart's office. Keeping his voice low, so that only his sister could hear, he questioned her choices one last time.

"You're sure this is what you want?"

Marian could tell he was worried, and while it was expected, it left an embarrassing stain. She was a grown woman; her brother shouldn't have been so worried over her. More than ever, Marian realized how badly she needed to step out from behind Devonshire's imposing shadow. He meant well, but her time had come.

"Yes, Robert, please. I am a short ride away. You will see me on Sunday for dinner and I'm sure Mother will find an excuse to come by and see the club in the bright light of day."

Robert didn't seem certain. "It's my job to protect you, Marian. I didn't do a good enough job with Teddy."

She cut him off sharply. "This isn't about Teddy. This is about me finding a new path for myself. I'm safe here, Robert." She squeezed his thick shoulder.

Robert gave her a shaky smile. Turning he gave a gruff nod to Bohart, who stood solemnly by the edge of his desk.

"Take care of my sister, Bohart."

Bohart didn't say anything, giving the man a curt jerk of his chin. Without a second look, Marian's brother disappeared down the hall leaving Marian in Bohart's office.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Marian turned jauntily to Bohart.

"May I see my room, Mr. Bohart? I'd like to get cleaned up before joining Abigail."

Bohart straightened, his eyes carefully taking her in. "Of course, I'll lead the way."

Up a flight of stairs brought them to an auspicious landing that opened up to five separate doors. Bohart paused, his hand casually pointing around them.

"Each current Blue Fiver owner keeps a room here, to be used at their discretion." He pointed over his shoulder at the room on the end of the space. "This is my room, the largest since I am currently the operating owner. Abigail has been staying with me."

“Perhaps I can join you for dinner this evening?” Marian offered quietly. “To let Abigail, know that I am here.”

“We would love that,” Bohart responded genially. He led her to the first door past his own. Holding a skeleton key up to her, he quickly inserted it into the lock and popped the door open.

“This is Fletcher’s suite now. He hasn’t been here for months, but we always keep the room up. I hope you’ll be comfortable here.” Stepping into the room Marian was overwhelmed by the almost painfully ornate space. From the gilded frames and mirror to the ornately woven rugs, every centimeter of the suite screamed glamour.

“Interesting taste, your friend?” Marian said casually, letting her fingers slide down the ridges of an elaborate entryway table.

Bohart glanced around the space, and for a moment Marian could’ve sworn that he cringed at the luxurious decor.

“Yes. Fletcher has a particular taste, that’s for sure.” Bohart said the words firmly as if they left no more room for conversation. It was obvious he wasn’t interested in discussing the matter any further. That was fine with Marian, she noticed that several of her bags were neatly lined up by the fireplace.

Her heart hammered as Bohart moved comfortably around the suite. It was obvious that he felt at ease here, being in this small, private space with her.

On the other hand, Marian’s entire body was humming with a mix of nerves and pleasure. She’d never truly been alone with a grown man. Let alone one like Bohart. She let her gaze wander his body as he strode about the space, pointing out details.

Facts, figures, servant names floating through the air, blurring her mind as she scrambled to take them all in. Her lack of focus frustrated her.

Finally, Marian held up a hand. Bohart fell silent instant, those brilliant eyes dancing as he watched her. “I’d like to get settled before dinner. If you don’t mind?” Marian’s voice was polite, professional. Inside though, her body quivered as a perfectly devious smirk stole across his face.

Her stomach clenched. His eyes were dark with something she thought she'd never see again. Heat blooded her body, making her breath come short in her lungs.

Intent. Focus. All on her, the full force of this man's legendary ambition washed over her like the sun over snow-covered flowers. She found herself rising on her toes, her body pulled to him like an invisible string had between them had been pulled.

"Of course, please excuse me." Bohart passed by her quickly, not meeting her eyes. From the landing, he turned back to the still-open door.

"I will see you at dinner. Let's say seven o'clock?" Marian suggested, her fingers tangling together against her frock.

"Perfect. We will see you then." Bohart's voice was rough, his eyes downcast.

Marian smiled and began to pick up the first of her bags to unpack.

"I'm glad you're here." He spoke from the open doorway, his jaw clenched as he stared into the room. He looked as if any moment he might take another step in.

Marian took a breath in, holding it to steady herself. Opening her mouth, she tried to think of a polite way to say thank you, but before the words could form in her mind, he was gone.

Shivering at the sudden chill in the air, Marian stepped forward and pushed her new door shut. Leaning her body against it she turned to her suite and smiled broadly. Her new chapter was shaping up to be quite a bit more exciting than the last.

Bohart had practically run into his suite, adrenaline carrying him through the door and into the dining space before the door swung closed behind him. He knew he must've looked like a complete fool, fleeing from Marian's rooms like a secret lover. If he had stayed in that room for even one more moment, he would've had to get closer to her.

Every move she made drew his eyes, from the moment he saw her in the Fiver, her fingers running across the plague, his mind and body had been begging for more. Just to touch her, to feel the softness of her skin, to listen to the soft, cultured voice. He needed to know if she felt the magnetism that he did, every time they were together it threatened to consume him.

Blood pounding, he turned to find Abigail and Peggy sitting at the table with a wide assortment of biscuits laid out in front of them. The child looked to be sampling a variety of them, her rosy cheeks filled to the brim.

Bohart thought of scolding her for a moment, then noticed the smiling happiness that encompassed the both of them. Abigail had only said a few words since tea with Marian the other day, but Bohart was feeling optimistic. By the time Martha returned the girl would be back to her usual chattering self, he hoped.

Martha.

He hadn't thought about her all afternoon, he had been so wrapped up in the arrival of Marian that he hadn't even had time to check in on the reports from his various sources across London.

His gut filled with thick, choking guilt. Martha was still out there. Bohart needed to keep his eye on the goal, he didn't have time for kind, beautiful house guests. Glancing at the little girl giggling at the table, he sighed. He didn't have time for curly-haired nieces either, but family always came first.

"Peggy, thank you for waiting with her. I can stay up here for now." Bohart's gravelly voice gave no room for negotiation. The woman had been at the Blue Fiver long before Bohart had stumbled in. Peggy had been a colleague, a friend, an ally, and now, a babysitter. She gave him a slight scowl but stood quickly.

"Bohart, whatever you are thinking? Slow down that brain of yours," Peggy said jauntily, unaffected by his tone and glower. She picked up her tray.

Bohart barely bothered to mumble a response, narrowing his eyes at her. She rolled her eyes, sending a quick kind smile to Abigail before she disappeared back to the kitchens below.

Abigail chewed thoughtfully on her last biscuit, eyeing her uncle with wide blue eyes.

“Hello, Abigail.” Bohart had found himself talking to the child regardless of whether she responded or not. “I’ve invited Miss Marian over. Do you remember her? From tea?”

Abigail’s eyes brightened; she swiped a hand across crumb-covered cheeks as she nodded.

“Well good. We will all have dinner together this evening and starting tomorrow she will be staying with you when I have to work downstairs.” Again, Abigail stayed silent, but her rosy features were serious. Bohart watched his niece digest this latest upheaval in her short life.

Bohart clenched his jaw so hard he felt his molars groan. No child should ever have to wonder where their parent was. If it was the last thing he did, he would get her back to her mother. And to whoever had caused his family, there would be no mercy from Montgomery Noheart.

Bohart trained his eyes on his niece, waiting for her to react. To his surprise, she swallowed the rest of her sweets and hopped down from her chair. Crossing the dining room, Abigail wrapped her arms tightly around the muscle of his thigh, squeezing him hard with her little arms.

Instinctively he dropped a hand to her curls, which had been carefully contained today by Peggy’s strong fingers, with a variety of clips and bows. A sharp, cutting string pulled on his heart. He had been wrong a moment ago, worrying over time spent.

This girl, this kind, sweet child was his future, his family’s legacy. Quite simply, she was everything.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetling.” Bohart’s throat was tight.

Against his leg, he felt her nod. He vowed again that he would find his sister, and in the meantime, he would do absolutely everything he could for Abigail.

Bohart paced the small foyer inside the penthouse. Abigail, freshly washed, and in a new dove grey dress was seated at the dining room table. The child had begun to whine a few minutes ago, and Bohart had panicked and given her a large glass of chilled milk to buy himself a few moments.

He knew that neither he nor Abigail was used to their new schedule together. Most days he would've already been downstairs patrolling his club, making sure that every inch of Blue Fiver was in perfect condition, and that every man within was enjoying themselves.

But here he was. He tugged at the cravat he had tied himself after changing into his evening formal wear. Bohart had never seen the reason for a valet. John was there most of the time, and while the steward would be displeased, Bohart was sure he would fulfill the duties if necessary.

Bohart was about to tug the offensive silk fabric away from his neck all together when a firm knock sounded against his door.

Lunging across space, Bohart jerked the door open. His face must've shown his growling anxiety because Marian immediately raised her brow. Her face grew worried.

"Is there a problem?" Marian asked calmly. Her manners were impeccable, no one could discount that.

"A problem?" Bohart had opened the door intending to unload his pent-up confusion, frustration at the woman who, in his mind, was here to help deal with that. However, the moment she spoke, his mind went completely still, struck dumb by the beauty that sat on his doorstep.

Marian had let some of her brilliant blonde hair loose, and it hung in a long golden sheet over her shoulders. The deep blue dress brought out the shining lights in her curious, intelligent eyes.

Due to his imposing stance and her petite height, Bohart now had a handsome view straight into her bosom. Desire shot through his body like lightning, straight to his groin.

Dragging his eyes back up to her face, Bohart gritted his teeth and sent a desperate prayer skyward that he couldn't see anything else from this view. Otherwise, the rest of his brain may shut off completely. The woman was beautiful, and more than a little tempting.

And she was watching him, a smirk on her lips.

"You looked a little...disgruntled...when you yanked the door off its hinges. Is there a problem?" Marian jerked her chin at his shoulder. He realized that his form was blocking her from entering the apartment. He dropped the offending arm with a tingle of something that reminded him of embarrassment.

That was odd because Bohart had given up being embarrassed a long time ago. When you worked in his business, traits like embarrassment, or shame, were quickly stomped out. There was no room for them.

Marian moved past him, elegance flowing from her every step as if it was a part of her perfume. Polite as ever, she didn't stare around the penthouse, simply moved into the dining room to greet Abigail. The little girl had managed to drink most of her dinner drink and was eager to pull Marian's hand back to the table.

"Sit with me," Abigail said eagerly, her face alight with joy the 'with' coming out a bit more like 'wif' from her lips.

"With, darling. And I'd love that. Show me your seat, please." Marian corrected her easily as if it were as natural to her as air. Bohart could feel the relief of having Marian there, it crept up his spine to curl around his shoulders, easing the tension and weight there. He smiled to himself, shutting the door gently.

He had made an excellent choice bringing Marian here. He could feel it. And as he watched her take her seat beside Abigail, something else, something deep inside, tugged at his gut as he

watched the pair of them.

The lure of domesticity he supposed, pressing a hand to his stomach as if he could away from the emotion with a physical movement. Yes, he had to admit, they were beautiful together. Marian with her bright smile and sweet voice. Abigail with her rosy cheeks and stubby fingers gripping Marian's dress.

Bohart shook his head. That was not an option for him. He'd given that up a long time ago. The voice in the back of his mind reminded him that was far before he'd met Marian. But it didn't matter when or why he had made that decision. He was not fit to be a father and even less fit to be a husband. Especially to someone like her.

Money sure, he could give her money. But women like Marian were used to prestige, elegance, a man who would spend all of his time doting, coddling, comforting. Bohart stole another look at her. Yes, she deserved a man like that. Not one whose knuckles were constantly raw from solving disputes the only way he knew how. Or who refused a valet because he didn't trust anybody. Or commonly took meals with his footman and cooks. He had risen from the depths of poverty the hard way. His hands would never be clean enough for someone like her.

He sat in his chair, wordlessly following her direction to hand her a small bowl of sliced bread. Their fingers brushed and her ice-blue eyes jumped to his. He'd been wrong, there was fire beneath that ice, and it burned into him as he settled back against his cushioned chair.

He couldn't have her. But that wouldn't stop him from pretending, even if it were a few days.

Everything Marian had tasted had been divine. While the Wains family kept a popular, talented team of kitchen staff, there was something so delicious about this meal that she found herself going back for additional servings. Or perhaps it was that she didn't have to flag a footman every time she wanted another bite. The room was strangely empty of servants, and Bohart himself served her several times before she got up the muster to begin to select her additional portions for herself. The feeling was both foreign and rewarding.

Abigail was a delight, sitting on her chair with a stack of accounting volumes boosting her up to table level. Bohart was charming, easy to talk with, and listened with great attention. Before she knew it, she had consumed everything on her plate and more. When Bohart pulled dessert off the tray and pushed it towards Marian and Abigail, her stomach was aching.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly.” Marian groaned at the sight of the toffee-drizzled cake. Even Abigail looked suspiciously uninterested her eyelids drooping as she slumped over towards Marian.

“I didn’t expect that from you,” Bohart said, twirling his fork between thick knuckled fingers.

“Expect what? That I don’t want dessert?” Marian grinned at him, her lips curling in a way that sent heat cascading across his chest. He raised a deep red brow.

“No, that you were a coward.” Marian’s jaw dropped; her face covered colored in indignation.

“I am not a coward! Take that back.” Abigail’s little face perked up, looking back and forth as the two volleyed the point at hand.

“I will not. A real lady could eat that. It would be impolite to leave it.” Bohart’s voice was twangy with humor, the creases along his lips deepening as he enjoyed taunting her.

Marian laughed loudly, letting her head fall back. “How could you possibly know what it is to be a lady, Mr. Bohart?”

Bohart winked at her. “I’m a man of many talents.”

Marian placed her hands on the table, leaning forward. “Now that, I am sure of.” A comfortable quiet settled over the room. Abigail was growing tired once again, her head heavy where she leaned into Marian’s arm.

“We should probably get her to bed. May I?” Marian stood dragging the child up with her. Abigail encircled her neck with an affectionate embrace that almost made Bohart jealous. He nodded, standing with them.

“I’ll show you to her room.”

Marian held the warm, lithe body tightly, her heart aching at the pureness of the child’s act. It was a short walk past a family parlor room, to a series of rooms down the hall. The second door was open, showing walls that were a pale orange that reminded Marian of the sunsets at Devonshire estate.

Settling the sleeping girl down on the bed, she quickly moved to remove her stockings and shoes, as well as the pins on her mane of curls. Tucking a thick blanket around her shoulders, she made a mental note to let the girl show her around the apartment tomorrow. She couldn’t and shouldn’t be sleeping in her day clothes every night.

Bohart had waited outside of the room, his form casting a hulking shadow into space. Marian noticed the shadow and felt the heat of his protection. Slipping from the room, Marian placed her hand on Bohart’s chest to usher him backward as she closed the child’s door. The action felt bold, but Bohart didn’t seem to mind or be that affected.

At least not like she was. Her hand was still tingling from its place on his chest. He didn’t feel like the men she’d danced with all these years. He was delightfully solid, his chest rising slowly beneath her palm as she stared up at him.

Suddenly she felt aware of how small she was compared to him. She’d always envied her friend Juliet, her tall, willowy body had always been so graceful, effortless as she coasted around the ballrooms of London.

But that was a memory of a long time ago now. Juliet was happily married. And for the first time in her life, Marian wondered what it would’ve been like to be swept up by this mountain of a man. She blushed. Thank goodness for the shadows and darkness that swallowed them both.

“She’s such a deep sleeper,” Marian whispered up to him, breaking the silence, her voice smiling. Bohart’s shadowed face remained a mystery. Growing conscious of her hands on his body, Marian flushed even deeper, her ears burning as she quickly walked towards the dining room.

Marian settled the plates back on the gleaming tray they had been brought upon. Keeping her eyes downcast, she felt, rather than heard Bohart come into the room behind her. Gripping her dessert plate, Marian placed it on the edge of the tray.

“You can’t get rid of a perfectly nice slice of cake.” Bohart’s rumbled, sending sharp awareness down her spine. He was close enough for her to feel the heat of this body as it came to stand behind her. She shivered. It took everything in her to not fall back into that heat, and let it consume her.

“I’m sure someone will enjoy it,” Marian whispered, the brush of his presence at her back, sending spiraling pleasure through her belly.

“One bite, and I’ll be happy. I cannot abide wasted food.” Bohart reached around her. His much taller figure was able to wrap his arms around her body and pluck the dish off the edge. Marian smiled, her lips quivering. She was afraid to turn around, knowing that she would be only a step from being pressed against Bohart from stem to stern.

She didn’t think she knew how to handle that. At least, *not yet*.

“One bite, then.” Marian wasn’t even sure he could hear her, but she turned, answering him with her body. Standing right behind her Bohart held a silver fork in one hand, a small bite of cake perched on the edge of the prongs.

His face was serious, his mouth slightly open as he watched her. He smelled like cinnamon and danger. It was a heady combination.

Swallowing hard, Marian opened her mouth enough to let the cake in. She tried to not focus on the way his eyes followed the movement, the pupils were blown wide, Bohart slid the morsel into her waiting lips.

With the richness of the toffee, combined with the silken texture of the cake maid Marian close her eyes in bliss. She must get the name of this chef. Bringing a hand up to confirm that there were no lingering crumbs Marian was startled as a rock-hard fist stopped her midair.

Bohart was holding tight to her wrist, the fork clattering to the ground. His eyes had gone dark, the blue so deep they were nearly black. His jaw was tight, and Marian was quite sure that she had never seen that vein on his forehead before.

With aching tenderness, Bohart brought up his second hand, and with a reverence that sent a shiver down Marian's spine, brushed his thumb against her lips. Instinctively Marian let her tongue slip out to wet her suddenly dry lips. Her tongue brushed against his finger, and she witnessed the flash of passion cross his handsome face.

"You should stay away from me, Marian," he whispered, his dark eyes holding her captive against the candlelight.

"I'm not the one moving so close," Marian whispered back haughtily. Her words were sure, but there was something in her voice that trembled.

Bohart froze his body tense. The air was heavy, filled with unspoken need as it swirled around them. Marian wondered briefly if Bohart was having as hard of a time focusing as she was. Beyond all else, she hoped that he could feel the almost painful pull between the two of them.

If she were to guess by the look of awe and desire on his face, he felt it too.

"I must be going." Marian turned abruptly, needing to break the tension that continued to grow and swell within her. She rushed to the door, reaching to fling herself through it. A heavy, strong hand beat her to it, closing with a sort of gentle ease over the knob. Bohart opened the door carefully. Without looking at him, Marian escaped into the dimly lit space.

Rudely, awkwardly, Marian rushed down the hall to the next suite, to her suite. Opening the door with a ruthless jerk of her arms. Safely inside of her rooms, Marian collapsed against the door, letting her fingers wander up to touch her lips again.

Her belly tightened painfully as she relieved the look, he had given her. He wanted her.

She was sure now. Assuming was one thing. Guessing was one thing. Witnessing that want, that desire firsthand, triggered something

so deep within Marian that she didn't know what to do. She wanted him back. Maybe as badly.

It had been a long time since she had wanted anyone.

It was terrifying. It was perfect.

It was all because of Montgomery Bohart.

Marian's first days as Abigail's companion went shockingly smooth. The child was happy to be in charge of the situation, showing Marian all of her favorite toys and books that Bohart had brought over.

As the days wore on, Marian decided two things. First, they were going to need more space for Abigail to play. She made a note to speak with John Styles, Bohart's steward about where else the child could play in the building.

The second is that Bohart's apartment desperately needed an update. There were breakable items everywhere, and after the second tragic break of the day, Marian was overwhelmed. Every chance she got, Marian collected some of the more fragile items and stowed them on crates under Bohart's bed.

Initially Marian had felt uncomfortable making changes to the man's bedroom, but it was immediately apparent that he rarely slept there. She did find a small box of books from his childhood, which she stashed in the front room for Abigail to look at. Perhaps Bohart wasn't used to living here, but his niece needed some stability, some feeling of family.

Not to mention that with only two more weeks until the Christmas holiday, Marian had a grand scheme to set in motion for the rest of the apartment. It was obvious that Bohart hadn't celebrated much in the past, but this year had to be different.

While Abigail napped in the early afternoon, Marian stole down to the kitchens to enact the first act in her plan. Both Bohart and Abigail had fondly mentioned Peggy, who seemed to run everything below the surface of the Blue Fiver. When Marian stepped into the busy kitchens, she wasn't sure what to expect, but what she

found was someone that resembled her grandmother.

Dusty grey curls were pinned back from a kind face-centered by eyes that were as sharp as a falcon. Perhaps she intimidated the errand boys and doormen with those eyes, but Marian had grown up under the thumb of not only the ominous Lady Catherine but several other equally daunting ladies within the ton.

It would take a lot more than threatening glances to throw her off her path.

“Excuse me, are you Ms. Peggy?” Marian dropped her chin in respect to the older woman, hoping to smooth over any mixed signals. The club’s head chef dusted her hands against her white apron, giving Marian a cool, calculating gaze.

One of the boys behind Peggy laughed into his sleeve. Peggy turned and without a single moment of hesitation, snapped her hand across the boy’s workplace.

“You’re looking at her, *my lady*. Ignore these heathens.” Peggy’s voice was surprisingly cultured, her tone that of an educated, authoritative woman. Marian loved her immediately. Abigail claimed that she was the best baker in all of London. Bohart claimed she was the biggest pain in the ass he’d ever kept on the payroll. But from the way he said it, Marian knew that he must be extremely fond of the cook.

Marian hoped that Peggy would also be her ally in bringing a bit more of Christmas to the club, and more specifically to Bohart’s life.

“I was hoping to speak with you about the holiday decor on the first and second floors?” Marian asked quietly, moving to stand beside the older woman.

“What would you like to know, my dear?” Peggy answered, rolling out what looked to be the final stages of a pie crust. Marian leaned against the counter, growing more comfortable amidst the lunchtime rush of patron orders.

“I was hoping to find out if I could still add additional orders to the holiday list? Mr. Bohart’s apartment is empty of all Christmas decor. If Abigail is going to be spending the holiday there, I believe it

would be in her best interest that we find some way to bring the season to her new home.”

Peggy looked at her hard. Brushing an anxious hand over her chest. “Did I say something wrong?” Marian asked quickly.

“No, not at all. I’ve never heard anyone refer to that palace as a home, even Mr. Bohart. It’s always been the operator’s apartment. Or maybe, the penthouse.” Peggy answered deftly. “But you are right, Lady Marian, we should make sure that little girl has a lovely holiday, with or without her mother present.”

Marian frowned sadly. “I can’t imagine celebrating without my family, I want to do absolutely everything possible to make sure that Abigail has a lovely Christmas holiday.”

Peggy reached out and tapped her finger on the back of Marian’s hand, leaving a flour mark against her skin that made her smile. “I love this idea. Tell me how I can help.” Pulling a small paper from her pocket, Marian grinned at Peggy.

“I’ve made a list,” she started, and Peggy laughed loudly, her joyful voice carrying through the kitchens and out into the halls.

Bohart was a coward. He would admit it freely to anyone. He was blatantly avoiding Miss Marian Wains. They were almost three days into her temporary employment as Abigail’s companion, and since that first night, where he had fed her that bite of cake, he had hidden from the woman.

Not that it had been easy. Abigail called for her, begged for her, and routinely ran to Marian’s room when he wasn’t paying attention. Since he still wanted to be a part of his niece’s life while she was at the Fiver, he had worked up a detailed daily schedule for Abigail. It allowed him plenty of time with her, while not neglecting the club.

He had been sending John to deliver it each morning, afraid of stumbling straight into the smiling face of his niece’s beautiful companion. It had been quite effective so far, this limitation of their time shared. And it was working seamlessly for Abigail as well.

In Bohart's mind, it was Marian's fault. With her flawless smile and her endless patience. She distracted him by simply existing, no matter how hard he worked to keep away from her. Bohart had spent the first thirty-odd years of his life devoted to his work, to make himself into the respectable human he knew lurked under the bastard's mask.

He had earned the affection of most of his peers, and the respect of the rest. He had never bothered with courtship, women, ladies, and the chaos that always followed. Sure, he had played into the stereotypical, but very enjoyable task of finding a mistress.

But after a few months, he had discarded the lovely mistress. He had always kept his personal life to a minimum. The real love of his life was the Blue Fiver.

Right?

Why did that tiny slip of a woman up in his apartment making him doubt everything. She was a force to be reckoned with. That was for sure.

John came into his office, puffing loudly. Bohart observed his steward for a moment, unsure of what he was witnessing.

"Is everything okay?" Bohart felt the need to ask. John straightened instantly, staring at his employer with wide eyes.

"Lord Fletcher sent me down. He's waiting for you upstairs, sir." John said as his voice whooshed out. Bohart stood quickly, practically throwing his chair to the ground.

"Did he say something about my sister?" Bohart bellowed as he strode across his office and past John in the doorway. He was up the stairs in a moment and John tailed him closely.

"No, sir, not that I know of. Miss Wains was serving tea."

"Thank you, John, stay down here and man the office," Bohart shouted over one shoulder as he reached the main landing. He didn't need to look back to know that the slight man was instantly relieved, sagging to the floor after his recent bout of stair running.

Pushing the door open wide, Bohart stepped into his foyer,

immediately greeted by another sight that would haunt him for all his days. Seated by the crackling fire was Lord Stewart Fletcher, the man who had become the closest thing to a father figure he'd ever known. Standing beside him was a smiling Marian, her arms full of a sleeping Abigail.

The child was curled in her arms, golden curls draping over Marian's shoulder as she instinctively rocked back and forth. As Bohart stepped into the room, the way she looked at him. It struck something deep within him, and it ached. He almost groaned. This is why he'd been hiding. That aching need in his chest exploded every time they were close. Even more so as she smiled tenderly at him over his niece's sleeping head.

Seeing the change in her face, Fletcher's silver-haired head turned to catch sight of him at the door, breaking the moment.

"Monty, perfect, glad you are here. I sent that pesky little assistant to get you, but I'm never sure what that's going to mean." Fletcher's calm, cultured voice rolled over his shoulders. He stood smoothly, his ageless form passing quickly through space.

"Your steward, he really is abrasive you know. You really should hire someone like my Salvatore," Fletcher said, grinning and gripping Bohart's extended hand.

"That criminal? I could never. John gets the job done fine and he doesn't try to strangle me with a cravat on the regular." Bohart defended his steward with an easy smile on his lips. He was glad to see Fletcher, hopeful for answers about Martha.

"Well, if you ever change your mind, you say the word and it's done." Fletcher clapped a friendly hand across Bohart's shoulders.

"Do you have any news of Martha?" Bohart didn't mince words, especially about his sister. Fletcher's smile quivered, he glanced back at Marian. She was surprised to see the venom in his case.

Hint taken. "I'm going to put Abigail down for a late nap. I'll be back in a bit. If you need me, Mr. Bohart, I'll be in my rooms." She moved off easily, carrying her precious sleeping cargo against her chest.

Bohart and Fletcher both watched the young woman walk away, her skirts swaying lightly as she rocked the child. As soon as she turned into Abigail's room, Fletcher slammed a slim, but well-trained fist into his chest. Groaning, Bohart glared at his friend and mentor.

"What was that for?"

"Who, exactly, is that stunning creature? And why is she in my penthouse?" Fletcher said, his voice a quiet hiss. While the joking words hit home, there was something serious lurking beneath Fletcher's words.

Bohart rubbed the spot Fletcher had hit. Perhaps the man didn't partake in any of the club's boxing events anymore, but his punches still had a bite.

"That's Marian Wains. A friend's younger sister is staying with me through the holiday. She's helping with Abigail since Martha is still missing."

"Marian Wains...as in Devonshire's Marian Wains." Fletcher's eyes were bright with interest, trained on Bohart's face.

Interesting reaction, Bohart thought to himself. While Fletcher's family would've held status and prominence in the city, Fletcher himself had been labeled a bit of an odd duck. While Marian's world recognized his influence, the man himself remained on the fringes of society. Bohart had always believed that Fletcher preferred it that way. But now, he wasn't so sure.

"Yes, there is only the one that I know of."

"I don't believe you. Why would that lovely, titled creature ever get mixed up with you?" Fletcher moved back across the room to flop down onto the couch. Bohart smiled grimly, remembering the vicious, but poorly enacted punch that Marian had tried to land on Lord Henry Fabrer when he'd threatened her friend months ago.

He could remember the exact moment her pretty, demure face had turned into one of the warriors. With her friend in danger, she had balled up a delicate, manicured fist and laid one out on the loan shark's ugly face. Beneath that polished, satin-covered woman was the heart of a lion.

Bohart sobered. He'd known from that moment that she was something special. And that he was attracted to her. Fletcher would see through his story in an instant.

"It's a long story with Marian." Fletcher's arched brows rose at Bohart's casual use of her given name. "But first, I need to know about Martha. Please, I've got men out working the streets all day now." Bohart hated begging. It was against his principles, but at the moment, that's how he sounded. Fletcher motioned to the chair behind Bohart.

"Sit down, Monty. Let's talk." Fletcher's fair, clean-shaven face grew serious, a rarity. "I've located some bits and pieces of information about Miss Martha, but I'm not sure you are going to like it."

"I don't care if I like it. She's my twin, Fletch, I need her back. Tell me what you know." He glanced down the hall. "Abigail needs her back."

Fletcher followed his gaze, wetting his lips. "My contacts say that she had been looking, for several months now, into your birth father. Asking a lot of questions that people don't want to hear."

"What?" Bohart said gruffly. "That doesn't make sense. Do we never know who he was? And if she did find out, why wouldn't she tell me?"

"From what I'm gathering, she was interested in meeting the man who provided you both lives." Fletcher's voice was bland, humorless.

Bohart soaked in the information. Silent.

Rumors followed their family, and when their mother succumbed to scarlet fever. Martha and Bohart were sent to live with their grandmother in a village far outside of London. Yet, rumors followed, people stared. And it triggered the pattern of rehoming that the twins came to expect in their tumultuous lives. Each time they moved things were worse. Less food, less attention, more harsh words. Several times the only attention they got from their caretakers was in the forms of belts and screams.

By the time they were sixteen, it was far easier to work and be on their own versus facing the chance of another relative giving upon them. It had been a relief when Bohart had secured his first job outside of their family's influence. He and Martha had been in rough shape, but they had always stayed together.

Damn their absent father, they'd agreed. They would do this on their own.

"Our father had been absent for our entire lives. Why would she pursue this now?" A headache lurked in the back of Bohart's mind.

"That, I'm not sure of. But from what I hear, she had located him and sought him out. After that, it goes silent." Fletcher sighed deeply. "Don't worry, I've got the best of the best out there looking for her. We'll find her, Montgomery."

Bohart scrubbed his face, his mind reeling through all the information Fletcher had relayed. He looked at Fletcher, nodding. After a minute, soft footsteps signaled the return of Marian.

"Lord Fletcher, would you like to stay for dinner? I'm happy to ring Peggy for," Marian's voice broke the silence tentatively.

"No, no, thank you," Fletcher interrupted politely. "I really must be going."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You must come by another time to visit; Abigail seems very fond of you." Marian was smiling at the man, Bohart could tell without looking. His chest warmed at the thought. Even with the odd greeting Fletcher had given her, she was trying. Manners were as much a part of her personality as that sweet laughter. But still, he appreciates the effort on her part.

"Of course, Miss Wains, it would be my pleasure." Fletched bowed grandly over her hand, before slipping from the room. Straightening, the gentleman made his exit. "Don't bother showing me to the door, it is my apartment after all."

"Was, Fletcher. Was." Bohart growled as he stalked after the man to close the door.

When he returned, his eyes went immediately to Marian's

expressive face. Indecision flooded his mind. How much had she overheard while tending to Abigail? How much did she want to know? He wasn't in the habit of talking about his bastard status, or the grim that he'd climbed out of.

And yet. Those shining blue eyes watched him softly. Her posture relaxed. For the first time in a very long time, Bohart wanted to let someone into the chaos of his mind. That thought alone almost sends him into hysterics, the idea of needing anybody was foreign, a black mark upon his already stone-filled heart.

"Would you like to talk about it? Or is there something I can do to help?" Marian moved to stand in front of him, her hand brushing his forearm as she looked at him with concern. His jaw stiffened, tightening as if even his body didn't want to give in.

It would be so easy to reach out to her. To slide his hands into those golden curls, to wrap his arms around the minuscule waist and bury his face against her neck. He did want to talk about it. But not at first. First, he wanted to feel her against him. To savor those sweet lips on his own. Need thrumming in his bloodstream, dark and thick.

He could see from her face that she wouldn't stop him.

"Not particularly, no," said Bohart lied softly. Her hand burned through his coat; her body dangerously close to his.

He could get addicted to the way she looked up at him, that fine-boned face so pure, her eyes bright with interest. Everyone in his life, save Martha, had been temporary. Relatives passed him around, gentlewomen flitted through his life, intimidated by his lifestyle, even his mistresses hadn't bothered to stay long.

But the way she looked at him, made him want to be something else, something permanent. Damn his gut. Damn that compassions he saw in her eyes. He wanted to stride across the suite, to grab her and haul up against him until he didn't know where she began, and he ended. He'd finally know if she tasted like honey. If she would look at him with horror or affection. He'd know how it felt to be wanted by someone like her.

Damn it all. He had no rights wanting any of that. And he knew it. But he couldn't stomp down the need that swirled in his gut.

Raising a hand between them, he let his palm smooth against her cheek. A shiver ran down his spine when she turned, letting her face rest against his skin. Her silken eyelashes brushed his palm, and it broke the leash of his control. Bohart slipped his other arm around her waist, hauling her up against him, exactly like he'd dreamed. Her breath caught, their noses bumping gently together.

With a hum of pleasure, Bohart finally gave in, and let his lips slide over hers in a gentle caress. For a long minute, there was nothing else in the world but her, and Bohart couldn't help but slide the tip of his tongue against her mouth. Her response was to arch against the arm he had supporting her, every part of her body pressed intimately against him.

"Miss Marian," came the soft call from somewhere behind Marian. Bohart practically dropped her as he stepped around to have her hidden behind his body.

Breathing hard, Bohart found himself bent at the waist, forced to release Marian, but desperate to stay connected to her. They shared a breath, each of them panting.

"I'm sorry," Bohart said bluntly.

Marian's brow furrowed, her face pale as she stepped out of the circle of his arms. "You're sorry?"

"I shouldn't have taken advantage of your kindness." Bohart rolled his shoulders, straightening to look down at her.

"I don't think that you took advantage of anything."

"I did. You're a young, inexperienced woman, and I overstepped my bounds."

Marian staring up at him in something akin to shock. "Good to know what you think of me.:

Bohart rolled his shoulders under his suit. This was not going how he'd expected it. "I'm trying to be a gentleman, Marian."

"I will work harder at being a lady then." She stepped to the door.

Bohart could've sworn the temperature in the room dropped

twenty degrees. He had hurt her, and she was running. He glared down at his hands, the bastards were still clenching, missing the way her body had felt against him.

“Marian, wait.” Bohart followed her to the exit, his hand reaching for her elbow. “I can explain.

“There’s nothing to explain,” Marian’s polite, cool voice rushed over his heated face. He narrowed his eyes at her. She smiled, her lips were pursed and humorless. “You aren’t that complicated of a man, Mr. Bohart.” Marian moved past him to the open door, his face was confused.

“Now I’m not sure what you are saying,” Bohart watched her open the door, tossing those shining gold locks over a slim shoulder.

“I’m saying, sir, is that whether I am young, old, experienced, inexperienced, it is no business of yours.” Marian raised a proud chin, reaching down to close the door between them. Leaving Bohart standing in his foyer, his face filled with anguish.

SEVEN

Marian practically scooted down the hall to her room. Half of her was afraid that Bohart might follow and challenge her, the other half of her desperately wished he would. That kiss would haunt her for days, if not longer. Her body still tingled.

Slipping into her room, she tossed her book in the direction of the dining room table and turned to the mirror to let down her hair. When she looked into the mirror, another face stared back at her.

With a muffled shriek, Marian leaped away from Fletcher's body.

"What are you doing here?" Marian kept her voice low, but her heart pounded from within her chest. Subtly she moved so that the doorway was at her back, a quick escape should she need it.

"You shouldn't be here," she repeated, louder this time. Only another step or two and the doorknob would be within reach. Fletcher's sharp gaze missed nothing.

"You don't need to run; I mean you no harm."

"He says while hiding in my room." Marian ducked her chin but refused to drop her gaze from his. The man had a few inches of height on her, but he was slender and dressed like a bit of a dandy. Her brother had not left her completely unprepared.

She had spent the better part of her life chasing one sibling or the other, she knew she was quick. Not to mention he didn't seem necessarily inclined to attack. He was leaning casually against the wall, glancing around the dimly lit suite.

"I expected better manners from the darling of Devonshire," he cooed at her, his head tilting slightly.

Marian snorted loudly. "Well, if you'd kindly exit, I'd be happy to try again." Marian swept a hand to the doorway, ushering him out of her suite. For all that her words were strong, even a little flippant, there was an ice-like chill that slid down her spine as she observed Bohart's friend.

Fletcher pushed off the wall with one slim, shoulder, the bright fabric of his jacket shimmering in the firelight behind him. A grin curled his lips, but the humor didn't reach his sharp eyes.

"You've got backbone, I have to say that I admire that. And you can stop reaching for that doorknob, I'm here to chat." Fletcher backed away a step, looking as if he meant to draw her into her suite further.

"To chat? Why the surprise, the drama?" Marian straightened away from the door but didn't release the tight muscles that held her body ready to spring into action.

"Oh, my dear, you have not heard of me. I thrive on drama. I blame an upbringing of hideously boring days. I became one of the original owners so that I could spend my days here, living during beautiful, controlled chaos."

Marian wanted badly to make a face, but she waited, a carefully painted smile holding strong. Men like him preferred to hear themselves talk more than get a response. Maybe Marian didn't know what to do with Bohart and his perfect lips and beautiful smile, but she knew what to do with men like Fletcher.

You ignored them and stayed as far away as possible. Which would be far easier if he would just take the opportunity to get out of her rooms. Shifting slowly, Marian positioned herself further into the rooms. This was her home now; she wasn't going to be the run to fled to Bohart's safety. Even if that was endlessly tempting.

Bracing her feet, Marian settled her arms across her chest to wait. It didn't take long. Fletcher's keen eyes sweeping around her rooms and the open door before he spoke again.

"I'm assuming Monty hasn't let you downstairs during operation, has

he? Smart man. Can you imagine some delicate little blue-blooded flower in the middle of all that...passion down below us?" Fletcher turned from her, strolling across the space to perch on the edge of a velvet pillowed chair.

"No, he hasn't. I'm not here to carouse with the so-called controlled chaos. I'm here for Abigail." Marian's voice was steady, her heart rate slowing as the man turned back into the aristocratic owner he had been before.

"Of course, you are, dear." Fletcher's eyes were dark in the dimming evening light. "It's all for the better anyway." He let the statement weigh on Marian, spending a moment straightening his clothing, decisively looking away from her.

She ground her teeth. The man was as obnoxious as he was interesting. "I'll bite Mr. Fletcher. Why is that for the better?"

Fletcher shook his head lightly. "Well, I thought it would be obvious. You are already putting your reputation at risk by being here. Even as a nursemaid to young Abigail, you are a lady, living above a gentlemen's social club, within easy reach of the handsome, devilishly charming and unmarried operator." His eyes found hers, "Seems a bit problematic. Don't you agree?"

Marian fumed. "I don't think that you should be worrying yourself over my reputation, Mr. Fletcher. Enough people already do."

"Yes, after that embarrassing scene with Teddy Conning, I imagine your family has little hope left for you anyway." Fletcher's face turned vicious, his comment flying across the room like a spear. She felt it strike, her body physically recoiling at his words.

"What does Teddy Conning have to do with any of this? Or my *reputation*?" Marian felt the impending tears welling in her eyes, the heat crawling up her throat.

Fletcher stood, the older man with a picture of aristocratic cruelty, his face a snarling mask. "I just wanted to remind you of what exactly you are doing here. You are here to be Abigail's companion until I find Martha. Nothing else. You need to leave Montgomery Bohart alone. Do you understand, Marian?"

Marian didn't accept threats well. Balling up her first, she

tilted her chin up. "I do not need you to remind me who I am, or what I have done. You may go now, Mr. Fletcher. And I prefer Miss Wains."

"Noted. Good talk, Miss Wains. I'll see myself out." Fletcher stalked past her. She remained completely, utterly still long after he closed the door and walked away. Perhaps there was an embarrassment, but it was overshadowed by the cutting freedom of anger. The man was a pig. She wondered if Bohart knew what the man was really like. Surely if he knew how Fletcher had treated her, he would see him differently.

She shook her shoulders, feeling the hot glide of a tear slipping out of each eye. But only one. She had cried over worthless men plenty of times before. No longer would she waste her time on that. Carefully running her cold fingers across her cheeks, she wiped the tears off.

With a deep steadying breath, Marian went to go freshen up. She had things to do before Abigail woke up from her nap.

Bohart was out behind the club, his shoulders hunched against the blistering British winter. Seemingly impervious to the cold, Abigail ran wildly around the cobblestone-covered ground. In a matter of hours, the finest carriages and horses would fill this space, bringing with them Bohart's patrons prepared to fill the Blue Fiver once more with life, action, and hopefully, profits.

But for now, he had deemed it an appropriate outdoor space for the child. He wondered briefly what Martha would say about her daughter playing in the backyard of a club.

He snorted. When they found Martha, he was going to remind her that he would get a pass on any further judgment on his acts as a stand-in parent.

He watched the little girl gallop after a ball, her giggles echoing off the hard-surfaced buildings surrounding them. The sound of her joy, so pure and simple, made his head hum with pleasure. If he was honest with himself, he found himself getting quite attached to the time he spent with his niece. While she'd been with him for a short time, but every second he could, he sought her out.

It wasn't long before Bohart couldn't find the power to look into her sweet face and turn her down. During their time today, he had taken her with him to a meeting with his accountant, Jenkins, as well as a tasting for tonight's dinner with Peggy. Now they had sneaked to the back of the Fiver before Marian would come looking for them.

They had settled into a rhythm, the three of them, and Bohart was embarrassed at how much he enjoyed it. He found himself staying later at dinner to hear about their days. And he had allowed Marian down to the first floor, when the club was closed so that Abigail could have some additional play space. Yesterday he had accompanied them shopping for a few last-minute Christmas presents.

He told himself that he oversaw these outings because of his responsibility to protect Abigail. But he knew, just as he guessed Marian did, that he loved accompanying them. Marian continued to be a bright, shimmering light in his days. He was transfixed by her kindness and easy smile, just as his niece was. They made quite a pair, dragging him from shop to shop yesterday.

Bohart grimaced. What was happening to him? Stupid gut.

Running a hand through his wild curls, he sighed deeply, letting the frigid air burn a path to his lungs. He had to stop thinking these kinds of thoughts. Abigail would be going home with Martha. Soon. The girl would be better off far from the Blue Fiver. And when Abigail left, there would be no reason for Marian to be here.

This is how things worked, how they always had.

He remembered the day he had sat down with the original owners, all five of them in a rare appearance together. Fletcher had led the conversation as their shrewd eyes had examined Bohart. It had been Fletcher who wished to step back, to split his percentage of ownership with Bohart.

The other members, all elite members of the ton, were not sure Bohart was the ideal candidate. They had questioned him for hours. Through it all, Fletcher had backed him, repeatedly stating his preference for Bohart as the sixth member of their group. He claimed they needed someone with some grit, a man who had calluses under his white kid gloves.

Fletcher had met Bohart during one of his underground boxing matches. He'd long retired from fighting himself, but had carefully, successfully built himself a lucrative role as manager, and agent.

Fletcher had struck up a conversation about adding a boxing gym to his club. Bohart was hired to advise on the addition to the Blue Fiver and their relationship evolved into an easy friendship. They were both businessmen at heart, driven to the point of obsession, to succeed.

Fletcher must've done a fine job advocating for him, because that night Bohart had signed the most impressive contract he'd ever seen, making him the youngest addition to the Blue Fiver owners. This also made him the operator.

Each man had served as the operator at one point or another, and now it was Bohart's turn. He had been at it for almost six years, and every day he woke up feeling invigorated. He managed the people, accounting, entertainment, group politics, and even the police on a daily basis. It was thrilling and it was exhausting. He had never wanted to do anything else.

Abigail ran past him, her cheeks pink from the wintery air. He frowned.

It was written into his contract that during his time as the Blue Fiver operator, he was expressly forbidden to have a family. No wife. No children. According to the agreement Bohart had signed when he bought into the Blue Fiver, even if he dared dream that Marian would return his affection, life as an operator was quite essentially, forced bachelorhood.

This was probably the reason that the other owners, except for Fletcher, had moved to their own homes, made families for themselves. Sometimes they taunted him for his utter disinterest in the temptations of domestic life. But truthfully, he had no interest in something he had never experienced.

Ambition is what propelled him, the thrill of a successful endeavor. Not romance, or babies, or homes in the country. Bohart had always been content with this aspect of his role at the Blue Fiver.

But now, every once in a while, a twinge of something like regret pulled at his mind. Always when Abigail and Marian were

around.

Bohart swallowed hard. He knew that he was attracted to the woman, you would have to be a blind man not to be. But it was more than physical. Bohart found himself making excuses to greet her, to seek her out when Abigail was playing or napping. Anything to spend time with her.

The idea that she might be leaving in a few weeks was like a knife in his chest.

At first, he had thought about asking Marian to move on a longer-term basis, to consider being his mistress. That was allowable with the owners, and he admitted that the idea of having her there sent his blood rushing. But, speaking those words, Bohart could see that beautiful face in his mind's eye.

He knew the haunted, disappointed expression would cloud her perfect eyes. Every time he had seen that look, he was driven to stomp whoever had caused that look to ever appear on this woman's angelic face. An offer to be his mistress would never be enough for someone like Marian. And he didn't want it to be.

For the time being, he would bide his time, keep a careful distance between the two of them, and remind himself nightly that she, no matter how she looked at him, was not his to take.

Why was everything suddenly so complicated, he wondered internally. As if hearing his thoughts, Abigail looked up from the pile of stones she had been building in one corner. She grinned at him, her face alight with the simple joy of a child at play.

Only a few more weeks, then his life would return to normal.

Marian couldn't sleep. She didn't understand. When she came here, Marian had expected to hear bits and pieces from the floors below. What little she knew about the Blue Fiver made her wonder on Earth they'd managed to prevent the music and crowd noise from moving up straight into their suites. But not a sound uttered.

The only way that Marian knew whether the Blue Fiver was opening and functioning below her feet was the soft sound of Bohart's

feet and door. That, for whatever reason, Marian could hear as clearly as a bell. And strangely enough, she always seemed to wake just before he departed and returned. Marian wasn't sure if it was her imagination or if Bohart hesitated just outside of her door.

Her rooms were smaller than his sprawling apartment, with the bedroom to her door directly connected to Abigail's. She'd realized after being there a few days that it must've been, at one time, the operator's mistress's chambers. The concept didn't shock her as much as it should've. Perhaps living over a well-established gentlemen's club was broadening her horizons after all. Her mama would be thrilled.

Before she could regret it, Marian threw her legs over the bed and dashed into the adjoining sitting room, yanking the door to the landing wide. Broad shoulders, bare of his usual jacket, face away from her. Slowly, so slowly, Bohart turned back to her. Her mind instantly lit up; he had been coming by to check on her. He was no more than halfway between her room and his when she sighted him.

"Mr. Bohart?"

His face lightened, even in the dim lighting she could see the pull of his lips as he looked at her over his shoulder.

Silence slipped between them, Marian crossing her arms when she realized that she wore nothing but a thin linen nightgown. His eyes followed the motion, and once more, Marian was struck by how much emotion he could convey with a simple look. This one was dark, sensual, and full of promise.

Marian could barely breathe for a long moment. Grasping for something, anything to say to the hulking man she'd chased into the hallway.

"How was tonight? Any news on your sister?" Instantly those dark, smoldering eyes turned chilly, the temperature around them cooling so much that Marian rubbed her shoulders as she awaited his response.

Bohart clenched his jaw, looking away. "One of my men thought they had stumbled onto some travel documents for her. But nothing. Fletcher has had the best luck of all of us, his source says she fled to the countryside."

“To the country? Why would she do that?”

“Something must’ve spooked her. Martha and I have been through a lot. It would take more than a few whispers and looks to send her running. Especially without Abigail.” He rubbed his chin, the slight shading there making Marian stare. She wondered for a moment what it would feel like against her skin. Would it be rough? Enough to leave a mark against her skin.

Oh goodness, Marian pressed her hands to her cheeks once again. Why was she always having these primal, wild thoughts around this man?

“I’m so sorry your search isn’t proving more fruitful.”

“Don’t worry about us, Miss Marian. You’re doing us all a favor by taking care of Abigail. Especially for the likes of me.”

Marian stared. “The likes of you? Do you and your niece deserve any less?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“You come from a world of dukes, earls, debutants, and ballrooms.” Bohart fixed her with those cold, dark eyes. “While I can pay for the price of admission, I could never consider myself part of your world.”

Marian swallowed, looking down guiltily. “you say that like it’s a bad thing. Have you ever considered that growing in a gilded cage, that I still might be able to make my own decisions about people? And my decision about you, and Abigail is that you are more than equal in my eyes. So, if you could, please kindly refrain from treating me like some hothouse flower. I am a grown, capable woman, Mr. Bohart.”

He stepped towards her; his stride enormous. “I can see that, Miss Marian.”

“And I insist.” Marian gulped. “As long as we are essentially cohabitating for Abigail’s benefit, please, just call me Marian.”

Another silence, this time warm and thick with tension. His hand reached out, brushing a strand of her hair that had come loose from her braid from her shoulder. His skin never touched hers, but the heat from his skin was like a phantom caress.

“Goodnight, Marian,” his voice was rough, raw. Her belly clenched low, making her knees quiver.

“Goodnight, Mr. Bohart.” Marian turned, her feet hurriedly carrying her back into her rooms. She closed the door quickly before she leaned against the softwood surface. Marian couldn’t decide if she wanted to giggle wildly or swoon into an exhausted puddle. The man was like no one she’d ever met before. A single word, her name, from his lips, had turned her into a child with a crush.

Strangely though, Marian couldn’t find it in herself to care. As she slipped back between the coolness of her blankets, her dreams were filled with dark, smoldering eyes and hands that regarded her like something precious, as something desired.

Bohart had never needed much sleep. But now with Abigail and Marian in his life, he found himself sleeping even less. It seemed like it was never enough, the hours working in the club, the endless paperwork, and his need to spend time with Abigail and Marian. It all meant that on nights like tonight when he’d snuck away early, the club unusually quiet, he needed to crawl into bed, fall straight to sleep, and catch up on some much-needed rest.

Except for there was no way he was sleeping now. Not with his mind racing with images of Marian waiting for him to come home. There was no other way to explain how she’d been away, how she’d known the moment he’d made sure her door was safely shut and turned back to his bed.

And God help him, those images were seared into his memory for all time. The way the nightgown had flowed perfectly over her full bust, the darkness of her nipples taunting him as she breathed, calling his name in the dim landing.

Bohart groaned, pushing his head further into his feather pillows, his hand reaching down to grip the iron rod he’d all but forced into submission earlier. He couldn’t blame his body, Marian

had shocked them both, and not just tonight. It seemed that every day they spent together, the more relaxed, the softer she was towards him. It had been natural to him tonight, after she asked him to call her by her Christian name, to reach out and play with the silken strands of her hair. The same locks that had haunted his fantasies, the way he knew they would drape over them as he made love to her. Or that he wished he could reach his hands into them, burying his fingers deep and holding her still so that he could plunder that sweet mouth.

He shuddered, his body screaming for release. Rolling his eyes, Bohart gave his body a tentative stroke. He was sadly used to this by now. It seemed since Marian had moved in, his body had been more keyed up than ever before. He couldn't even remember a time as a teen that he'd felt this constantly desperate. He'd even gone to one of his favorite ladies this week thinking he might ask for her to help relieve the pressure that had been haunting.

He'd been in her presence only a few minutes when he'd acknowledge that it wasn't desired that was building up in his system. It was the desire for her. Her simple touches, the sweet voice was more powerful and desirable than any woman's forward propositions. He'd left, practically running home so that he could sit across from a table and watch Marian chat with Abigail about their day.

He'd been ruined by this woman; her ice-blue eyes and quivering lips. No one else would do.

Which made all of this quite impossible. As he began to stroke himself in earnest he let his mind wander, letting his mind grab onto what it would feel like to have those lips on his. To roll her beneath his body, letting his hips fit between those perfect lush thighs, and drive them both to madness. Bohart could only guess, but he could picture Marian being a response, eager lover. He didn't give a fuck if he was her first, but there was a deep, throbbing thought in the back of his mind that screamed that he wanted to be her last.

Which wasn't fair to her. But by God, he wanted it as much as he wanted to feel her mouth on his. He wanted it more.

Gripping his body tightly in his hands, he let his mind explode with the thought of how her sweet body would wrap around his, curling into him, basking in their shared joy.

Short moments later, Bohart groaned out his release, his body

finally relaxing into the sheets. After he'd cleaned himself up, he rolled onto his side, thoughts drifting straight back to Marian, what he could do to convince her that he might be worthy. And to convince himself as well. He feels asleep with ideas flitting across his mind, and a hand across space in his bed, picturing the soft body of his niece's caretaker filling the space with warmth.

Marian had barely pulled herself together when a sharp knock sounded against her door. Opening it slowly, she found Bohart there. Fully dressed for the day and devastatingly handsome as always, he smiled broadly at her.

"Abigail and I have a question for you." He stepped aside, his niece was wringing her hands directly behind him, her pudgy cheeks flushed.

"Uncle Monty and I were going to get Mama something for Christmas. Will you come with us?"

"And help us to choose something," Bohart responded, a smirk pulling his lips in a way that made her sleep-deprived mind take immediately notice.

Marian laughed. The pair of them took a perfect little picture. Bohart with his dark red curls perfectly in place, the usual deep blue eyes were bright, dancing as he observed her.

"Don't you need to get down to work? I can take Abigail and get something for Martha." Marian didn't blame him but understood that he was an important, busy man. He probably didn't have time to be out shopping with the two of them. Not with Fiver to manage. Or Martha to find, for that matter.

But he surprised her again, leaning down to grab Abigail under her arm and hoist her up against his side. The girl giggled wildly, slinging her arms around his neck.

"Not at all. It would be my pleasure to take such fine ladies out for a shopping trip."

Marian felt her jaw go slack, then couldn't stop the excited squeal that slipped from her lips. "What a wonderful idea. Abigail,

what do you think of Mrs. Peggy getting us some of her biscuits to go this morning? We can get on our way even before breakfast.”

Abigail's response was to squeal equally as loud, leaning back away from her uncle with a whoop and a grin.

Bohart flinched at the loud noises, but a grin had taken over his face as he turned. “Be ready in ten Marian. I will go rustle up some of those sweets for you two.”

Minutes later, Marian found herself strolling down the streets, Abigail's tiny gloved hand in one of hers. The wind was bitter, sharp, but it felt refreshing as the three of them made their way down to Marian's favorite crop of shops. Abigail had already informed her that her mother's favorite color was blue, and she would want at least one new dress this Christmas. Bohart had readily agreed and marched along behind them, an overly large shadow. But instead of casting coldness, Marian was warmed by his presence, his protection.

Until now, she'd never noticed how much she relied on her family's servants or her brother for their protection. And while this area was a wealthy, safe neighborhood, Marian felt exposed, even in her layers. As if sensing this, Bohart had moved closer as they approached the first shop.

“I'm going to attend to some of my shopping,” Bohart offered softly, his hand resting just off of her body, the warmth leaking into her layers somehow.

Marian nodded, gripping Abigail a little tighter. “I'm sure we will find what we need here or next door. Perhaps we meet at the bookstore as soon as we are finished.” Marian pointed at the friendly, bookcase-covered building directly to her left.

Bohart swept the crowd. His body was already a powerful deterrent, but those eyes, blazing and dark, were sure to make anybody think twice. Marian felt a deep throb at her core. The protectiveness, the safety was the first thing she associated with Bohart. From the moment he'd picked her up, carried her to safety all those months ago. But it was a powerful force, being surrounded by that all the time.

Marian found she quite liked it. It was different than her parent's or even her brother's protection. Bohart may come without

title, his edges slightly rough, but there was no doubt in her mind that Bohart would never let anything happen to her or Abigail.

Turning, she slipped into the shop, Abigail's eager face wide and excited at all the beautiful fabrics that came into view.

Thankfully Bohart had ordered something for his sister from here before, and the owner was more than happy to help Marian and Abigail select a few fabrics in bold, bright new colors for Martha's Christmas gift.

Abigail's wonderful, her little fingers tugging on the fabrics as they were selected was enough to make Marian's throat tighten. Little girls need their mothers. And while Marian didn't know Martha, she hoped that the woman was alright, that she'd be returning to them soon. Her daughter needed the care and support a mother provided. Marian gathered the child close to her body. Until Martha could be found, Marian would provide her as much affection as she was capable of.

"Abigail, do you think your mama will like this?"

Abigail, too overwhelmed and excited, only nodded, stroking the fabric gently. Marian smiled at the owner, solidifying the details for the order quickly. She still wanted to duck into the bookstore and see what books the child might like for Bohart's apartment. Abigail had proven to be very interested in Bohart's books, and the two of them spent hours a night reading from the short stories. It was about time to refresh the selections. Marian loved to read and couldn't wait to see what Abigail might want to try next.

Tugging the girl gently, Marian bustled them back out onto the sidewalk. And straight into conflict. There standing on the sidewalk was Samuel Leven. The second son of Lord Tallenhale was tall, good-looking, with a bit too much of a nose for Marian's liking. But it hadn't stopped her from allowing him to court her after her scandalous interaction with Teddy Conning. Samuel had claimed he didn't care about her controversial season, or that she had fallen in love with someone from a lower class.

He'd been polite, if not a bit forceful during their brief courtship. It had been apparent from the beginning that they weren't a match. But Lord Tallenhale had insisted, describing his son as a kind, warm man who only needed a lady like Marian in his life to soften the

rough spots.

Marian gave him a small smile, hoping his presence here was nothing but a strange coincidence. Samuel returned the smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Samuel, how lovely to see you. How is your family?" Marian inched towards Bohart's waiting carriage. Dislike left a heavy tang in her mouth as she curtsied to the man before her.

"Very well, Marian, very well." He took a step to them, too close in Marian's opinion. His brown eyes observed Abigail closely, looking between the two of them, down to the hands that they held. "And who is this?"

Abigail must've sensed a change in Marian because instead of answering how they'd been practicing, the girl stepped closer to Marian's skirts. Marian pressed her hands to the child's shoulder. "This is Abigail Bohart. I am her governess for the season."

"Bohart. Abigail Bohart, you say. Is this one of Montgomery's No-hearts by-blows?" His eyes never left Marian's.

She stiffened at the horrid nickname, pressing her gloves to Abigail's ears. "Of course not, Montgomery Bohart is her uncle and guardian."

"I barely believed it when I heard from Mother had you'd taken a governess role already. It's a shame to see you heading for the shelf at such a young age."

Marian almost gasped at the inappropriate statement, her stomach roiling in anger. "Excuse me, Mr. Leven. We have an appointment elsewhere."

"Wait, Marian, wait, I'm sorry." Samuel grabbed her upper arm as she passed him. By the time Marian looked up at him, he was stumbling back, eyes wide as he caught sight of the enormity that was Montgomery Bohart.

"For what do you need to apologize to the lady about?" Bohart's voice was gritted, so low that it practically vibrated between the two men. Samuel straightened, his chin jutting out as he appraised the other, much larger man.

“Just a simple misunderstanding.” Incredibly, and oblivious to the situation, Samuel continued. “The Darling of Devonshire here was just telling me that she is a governess now. It seems a shame doesn’t it?”

Bohart’s eyes glittered. Marian felt a shiver go down her spine, but not one of fear. It was recognition, submission even as she held Abigail to her.

“It is a shame that she has too fine of manners to not tell you what she thinks of you, Tallenhale. But, since we are all here, and I’m happy to provide her with whatever support she might need. Please, Marian, do you have anything you’d like to say to this man.”

Marian’s chest heaved. She had plenty to say to Samuel. Things she’d never dreamed she could say. She looked up at Bohart, who regardless of the temper Marian knew was lurking beneath those cool, beautiful features, stood calmly beside her. She squared her slender shoulders.

“You will address me as Marian Wains, or Miss Wains from here on our Mr. Leven. And please, limit our interaction as much as possible. In no world would I have ever considered you, whether you’d been the last man in London. So please, stop pretending that are, or ever were friends. And if you care to mention my family, I’d prefer to be a dragon any day than your darling anything.”

Marian finishing with a ragged breath. Samuel’s face was pale, surprise and shock clear. With a quick nod to Bohart, he stepped back. Miss Wains,” he offered softly, before tipped his hat to Bohart and offering a bow to Marian and turning and hurriedly making his way across the street.

Marian felt her heart pound in her chest, her blood surging to her face as she gripped Bohart’s biceps in hers, leaving Abigail safely tucked between them.

“That felt incredible.” Marian laughed, her head falling back to the grey sky. “Truly incredible.”

Bohart offered a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Marian sobered a bit, squeezing the thick muscle under her hands. She could feel the tension under his coat, the carefully contained reaction.

“Mr. Bohart, thank you for coming over here. For allowing me the chance to speak my mind.”

His face didn't change, if anything, it darkened, sharp eyes still fixed on a nameless object across the street. “Montgomery.” His eyes dropped to hers, the fire within raging. “Abigail and I are safe, we are alright now.

He nodded jerkily. Holding out his elbow for her to take. Abigail, who had caught onto the strangeness in the air, gripped Marian's free hand tightly in her own. “Let's go home, shall we?”

Bohart stepped out, leading the way, Marian carefully holding onto him as they passed the short distance between the shops and the waiting carriage. The entire trip back, his throat was still working, the muscle there flexing repeatedly.

Finally, as they neared the front entrance, Marian couldn't resist. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” Bohart was controlled, steady as he watched her.

“That I had been waiting for years to say those things to Samuel?” Marian climbed nimbly from the carriage before the Blue Fiver footman could dash to the carriage.

Amusement flickered across his features, making Marian's stomach twist delightfully. “One look at your face told me a hundred things. And most of them seemed to be directed at Tallenhale. I simply provided you the means to issue out all those declarations.”

Marian turned, picking up Abigail as she did. “And again, I must say thank you. I feel oddly refreshed.”

“I am always happy to provide that support, Marian, whenever and wherever that may be.” He leaned forward, unafraid of the footman was watched by the door. Marian's eyes fluttered shut as Bohart leaned into her, brushing his lips over her cheek before pulling back to do the same to Abigail.

“I must see to some business. Should we talk at dinner?”

“Yes, yes, of course, dinner.” Marian didn’t move. She was afraid to, her feet were glued to the sidewalk they stood upon. Her body was frozen as she watched her employer, her protector walk away. He’d taken a chance on her, again and again, trusting her with Abigail, even as she stumbled into her life outside of her family’s reach.

And still, after all her bobbles and slips, he’d stood at her back, like an anchor in the storm of her life. A sharp tingle raced down her spine. How did you thank one for giving you the chance to finally be yourself? Marian ran her fingers over the small packages Abigail still held. A gift didn’t seem like enough. She sighed. She would find a way to thank Montgomery Bohart for his support and friendship.

Marian hurried around the penthouse. She had been slowly moving bits and pieces of the apartment around. While Bohart had admitted at dinner one evening that he’d lived there for almost six years and done virtually nothing to personalize it to his taste.

And while she didn’t know his taste, she hoped that it was nothing like Fletcher’s. Even now, the memory of Fletcher’s face made her flinch. He was a special kind of rude, and since they had talked a few days ago, she had been relieved he hadn’t been back.

Abigail helped cozy up the apartment as well, bringing some of her favorite blankets and toys out of her room and finally growing more comfortable with her living arrangement. With no word from Fletcher, and Bohart’s information still turning up nothing, Abigail may be here for longer than a few weeks.

The thought was sobering in the least, but Marian wanted to make her time here with them as beneficial as possible. She had begun keeping records of what the child enjoyed, thrived at, and struggled with. It was her deepest hope that someone perfect would be able to take on her role after the new year began. Abigail deserved the best, and she knew that Bohart would stop at nothing to get her that.

Two quick knocks at the door startled Marian. She dusted her hands off on her flowing day dress and hurried to open it. Peggy smiled back at her from the landing, arms full of a large crate. Behind her, a suspicious-looking John stood, a frown pulling at his thin lips.

Marian opened the door wide.

“Please come in.” Peggy immediately marched in, moving straight to the dining room table and dropping her cargo. Bohart’s steward appeared less eager his nervous face twitching as the Club chef made herself comfortable.

“When do you need the rest?” John said absently, still hesitating on the far side of the doorway, as if the entryway itself held some sort of protection.

“Now would be lovely, John. Thank you.” Marian gave him her brightest smile. To her pleasure and surprise, the man almost smiled back. He turned quickly and disappeared back out of sight before any evidence may be found.

Marian turned back to Peggy who stood, hands planted on hips. “You better stop sweet-talking that man. You’re going to send him into a fit.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Marian walked over to join Peggy, a small smile across her face.

“Sure you do.”

“I don’t mean to be a stress to anyone. I hoped that by now he would trust me a little more. Or at least pretend to.”

“That’s John for you. He’s as loyal as they come, but that also makes him quite the critic.” Peggy patted Marian’s forearm. “Don’t worry your pretty head about that man. He’ll come around.”

Marian nodded quietly.

“Have you told him about the opportunity in Eastwind?” Peggy’s voice was gentle as she approached a topic they’d barely spoken on. A few days ago, Marian had received a letter from a friend of Mr. Bohart’s, a Mr. Campbell who was another of the original owners of the Blue Fiver.

He had heard of her services in Abigail’s time of need and had asked after her plans for the new year. His twin granddaughters, age four, were in desperate need of a nanny. Someone who could stay on with them long term at his estate just outside of town, called

Eastwind. Marian had gone straight to Peggy to find out more about Fredrick Campbell.

Peggy only had wonderful things to say about the eldest of the Blue Fiver founders. While not the savviest of the investors, he came from old, quiet money, and had made quite the splash when he dived into life as a club owner.

He, unlike the others, frequently visited the club, bringing his son with him whenever he was around. Peggy also whispered that Fredrick had been the first to break the marriage clause that each owner was required to sign.

While they voted to allow him to remain in the organization, it had been quite a drama. Even more so when it was revealed that he had risked it all for a beautiful, exotic Greek songstress who worked in the club with them all. Peggy's eyes went misty when she described how they had broken ever tradition, every rule standing between them. All in the name of love.

Marian had no doubts about liking such a man. And on top of that Peggy described Mr. Campbell as a fair, honest and kind to his employees. After Bohart, Marian would have no issue with the man. Secretly Marian wanted to see what kind of marriage a nobleman and a club singer had managed for over twenty-five years.

But that was the difficult part. The Campbells were hoping she could come as soon as they could. And Marian knew that Bohart was still actively looking for a more permanent replacement for Abigail. As far as he knew, she was not available to help any longer than that. And for the sake of her reputation, Marian knew that each day she remained further drove home the blade through Devonshire.

No longer the Darling, she would be a spinster, a governess, a weight upon her family's shoulders. Her sister's prospects would suffer for it. Her brother, however little he cared, would bear more of the whispers. Yet, the thought of actually leaving the Blue Fiver left Marian aching.

Her and Bohart's paths would cross again, that was for sure, but never again in this type of proximity. And never again would it be considered proper. It was already a stretch in the current situation.

She wanted to take the job with Campbell, but only if Bohart

wanted her to. Which was extremely confusing. Once she had learned about the marriage clause in the owner's contracts, she had understood why Bohart had said over and over that he would never marry. He had worked his whole life for the respect and notoriety that he received from Blue Fiver. No matter how he might look at her, or want her as she wanted him, the club would always be his first love.

"Now, would you like to see what I had the boy's dig up from storage?" Marian leaned over expectantly as Peggy lifted the lid off the crate dramatically. Peeking in, Marian burst out in giggles.

"He's going to hate it." Marian let her head fall back, twinkling laughter filling the room as Peggy joined in.

"I know, that's the best part," Peggy said before breaking out in more laughter. "How much time do we have?"

"Maybe an hour. We'd better hurry." Marian reached in and began unveiling her grand plan to break through the rock-hard wall that was Montgomery Bohart.

EIGHT

Bohart's mind was numb, exhausted by a day of meetings, chasing Abigail, and the slow and sure undoing of his mentality regarding his missing sister. He trudged up the staircase to the owner's landing and turned to the penthouse.

He didn't bother pulling out a key. Abigail, and therefore Marian, would already be inside. John had run the child upstairs after she gallivants outdoors.

Narrowing his blue eyes suspiciously, Bohart stared at the small, perky-looking pine tree that, along with its pot, now stood beside his door. Drawing it closed, the scent of fir invaded his nostrils.

Recoiling back with surprise, he realized that this wasn't some delusion. It was very much a tree, standing spotted by his front door. To add to that was the awkward cut-out star that was strung along with one of the top branches.

Bohart's mind felt sluggish, confused as he stared. Shaking his head, he turned to his door. Turning the knob, he stepped into the sanctuary of his apartment. Immediately, his body tensed, unsure.

"Uncle Monty!" squealed Abigail as she hurled her way into his arms, a welcome, if not confusing weight against his body. "Look what we did, look, look!"

And look he did. His apartment was covered in garland, bright red ribbons, and by his fireplace, an array of stockings hung. His face must've spoken volumes, because Marian was there, appearing at his side as if by magic. She slid Abigail into her arms, carrying the chattering child a few feet from him as he had a moment to take in the holiday decor.

“It’s very nice, Abigail.” Bohart felt the words leave his mouth, even if he wasn’t sure, he had sent them. “I need to speak to Lady Marian. Can you please go to your room for a moment?”

“Yes, Uncle Monty,” the child whispered loudly, sliding down Marian’s body until she could dash off into her room, quick as a mouse.

Silence fell. Bohart turned to look at Marian. He was angry. He had asked for her to care for his niece. Nothing else. What she had done here, had been a horrible invasion of his personal life that he couldn’t, wouldn’t forget about.

“What were you thinking?” Bohart knew his voice was filled with daggers. He stepped into Marian’s personal space, staring down at her as the holiday scents swirled around the two of them.

At first she shirked from his gaze, his inquiry. Her polite nature came to battle her inability to let him win. A part of him triumphed when that perfect, stubborn chin flew skyward. Her eyes were like ice, flashing, cold, strong.

“I was thinking that any child, especially Abigail, deserves a wonderful Christmas. I did my best with what you had.” Marian seemed to steel herself against him, her slender body shaking as he again stepped up against her. Bohart stared down at her, his body, however, practiced, however knowledgeable, seemed to vibrate with the knowledge of how close he was to the thing he wanted most.

“You think I don’t know what she needs? She needs her mother. She doesn’t need decorations.” He gestured around the room. The colorful candles glowed, tied up boughs of a variety of evergreen decorated the doorways. She’d even gone daring and hung mistletoe over the front door.

“You don’t need to be rude, Mr. Bohart. I was trying to help. You can shout at me all you want. You can rant and rave if you’d like. I will even leave if you prefer, but do not be upset at Abigail. She deserves all of this and more.” Marian’s voice shook a bit. She swallowed hard to calm the urge to cry. It settled below her breast, biding time until his next hurtful words came.

Bohart’s head dropped, a deep breath shuddering out of his

form as he stared at the floor. Time stretched between them, tense and tight. He walked past her, dropping his weight into the high-backed chair with a sigh that drew her eyebrows together. He scrubbed his face.

“I’m sorry, Marian.” He swallowed loudly. “I have never had the chance to celebrate the holidays like you have. I have no idea what a child might want. What is normal for them.”

She was making this difficult. Very, very difficult. Her stubborn chin, her lack of propriety, her kind heart. All of it, it was too much.

The moment that Abigail’s door settled in the frames, he sprung. With one arm he captured her waist, the other hand flying in the luxurious length of golden hair that hung down her back. As soon as she gasped, which he expected, he fastened his lips to hers in a kiss that he would never be able to forget.

She tasted like mint and sharp winter air. It was intoxicating as her taste washed through his senses. He would never be able to forget the way she felt against his lips. If he had thought of kissing her once would ‘get it out of his system’ he was sorely wrong. This was an addiction in the making. The taste of her lit across him like a flame to gasoline.

Her hands flew up, fisting against his chest. He noted with great pleasure that they didn’t push him away, but also weren’t quite pulling him closer. They simply existed, balanced on the precipice of this new chapter of their relationship.

Letting his lips lead the way, Bohart tightened his hold on her, finally confirming the beautiful, slim curve of her body against his own. For a second, he worried she would rebuke him, pushing back and or pinning him with one of her most scolding glares.

Yet, something was different. It was changing. Slowly, carefully, each of her muscles was released with a sigh. The moment she relaxed, sagging into his embrace, he thought that he might faint.

She transformed from a firm, surprised pair of lips against his, to the instigating, passionate partner he had dreamed of. Her lips parted, a small, needy sigh whispering between their lips as she curled her spine up and against his larger frame.

As if begging, needing his touch, her breasts ground up against his chest. Running his hand up from his waist, he let his hand slowly, purposefully caressing the swell of the outside of her breast. At his touch, she quivered.

He wasn't sure if it was the act of touching her, or her response to his touch that was driving him mad, but he was close to it at this point. Drawing in a deep breath, he opted to use his legs. To push this moment to its limit.

Stepping back, he again took control, sliding his tongue into her waiting mouth. Reaching both hands under her arms, he bent slightly to pick her up. Instinctively, he assumed, her legs went to wrap themselves around his waist, her body curling up to meet him like a flower meets the sun. She was no heavier than a feather, yet his body shook.

Taking her lips again, he plundered her mouth, begging, looking for a handhold on this slippery slope they suddenly found themselves on. As if drawn by a greater power, Bohart felt his legs moving, propelling them forward into his apartment, into the hall. As they passed Abigail's room he briefly hesitated, wondering what the child would do should she come back out.

"She always has quiet time before dinner. Don't worry." Anxious, excited hands urged his head back down her hers.

Sweet Marian. She flooded his senses.

He couldn't get enough. Every part of him felt like he had suddenly stepped into the fire. Her small, dept fingers were caressing his head, finding their way through his curls to slide lovingly against his face. And when his tongue found a particularly enjoyable spot, he could feel the way her thighs shook around him.

His mind was filled with her. Her scent. Her fingers. The way she rolled her body against his as he made his way into his bedroom. He couldn't get enough. Ever.

With a muffled groan he fell into the bed with her, his body barely noticing the change in pressure, except to notice that he had more options for where he could put his hands. Running them down her swan's neck to her bust, Bohart hesitated, then dropped his head there. Letting his cheek settle right in between the small firm mounds

that graced her body.

She was insistent though, after only a few moments of resting upon her, Bohart felt her tugging at his hair with her fingers, pulling at him. He raised his head to hers, where desperate lips gripped his. Her hips bucked up against the heavyweight of his body. She was water boiling over, and he was the only thing that could fix it.

Smoothing a hand down her hip, he found her day dress had gotten caught up on his clothes, displaying a large quantity of beautiful, pale flesh for his eyes. Sliding his hand up her thigh, he groaned. Of course, she was as beautiful underneath her clothing. Soft as silk, and just as fragile, his fingers wound up her stockinged legs.

He pulled away to catch his breath, his fingers gripping her thigh tightly. Too tightly, he worried. Would he leave a mark? She was no rough and tumble plaything; her body wouldn't be used to this kind of passion.

Well of course it wouldn't be. She was a gently bred lady, custom-made for a husband. His mind started to turn, his body stiffening against her warmth. This was not her lifestyle, and she was not his to mark, to kiss.

The truth curled like talons in his chest. He adored her. Which was exactly why he could not take this a moment further.

Every second they shared the apartment, let alone this bed, he was risking her future. Her chance at marriage to a good man, a gentleman, who would eat dinner at a regular hour. Who slept in bed with her each night? Who understood what it meant to decorate a house for the holiday?

That was not him. It couldn't be.

Putting his hands on the sheets, Bohart pushed his body back sharply. This will hurt, he thought. He stared down at the woman beneath him, her heavy-lidded eyes dark with desire, her dress off one shoulder, baring more of her pristine body to his gaze.

"You should leave." Even to him, the words sounded odd against the backdrop of passion that swirled around their bodies. Marian cocked her head, her legs drawing up closer to her body as she watched him.

"I don't understand. Mr. Bohart?" Bohart cringed. He hadn't even given her permission to use his given name, yet he had kissed those soft lips, explored her body with his hands. And now, he was asking her to leave.

"Trust me, Miss Wains. You should leave." Marian's face went slack with shock, and with horror. In a flurry of motion, she was off the bed and out of reach. Quick, efficient motions fixed her hair, those fingers of hers, which had moments ago been pulling him against her, now tucked in loose strands. A few jerked movements across her dress, and she turned to look back to him.

It was as if their embrace had never happened, she had reset herself. On her face, a cool, disinterested mask gazed lazily back at him. A testament to her mother's careful training, she gave nothing away.

"Good evening, Mr. Bohart."

Marian turned and walked from the room casually as if strolling across a ballroom floor. Head held high, she left him in the dark, still leaning over his bed, smelling the sweet mint that would forever remind him of her.

Could you die of embarrassment? Apparently not, Marian thought as she stalked around her room. Otherwise, she would surely be dead.

What kind of man, what kind of monster, tortured women like this? She had practically flung herself into his arms, begging him to make her forget everything. And he had turned her down.

She was horrified. According to their schedule, she would be the one to get Abigail up and settled before breakfast, yet she couldn't even imagine stepping foot in that apartment ever again. Crossing her arms across her chest, she looked around her suite, hoping for something to take her mind off.

Letters. She practically ran to the small stack that the maid had left earlier. There was a short, folded note from her mother. A longer one from her father that she set aside, and a thick one from her dear

friend Juliet. She ripped it open furiously, desperate for some kind of distraction.

Her eyes skimmed through the top portion. Juliet's script was sprawling and hurried. It made her smile. The dark harried marchioness had never been patient, but it was that rush, that passion that had led her straight into the arms of her husband, William. Marian was almost to the bottom of the first page when she read something that struck her so deeply that she felt her heart skip a beat.

The renovations to Mansfield Park are coming along. Too slow for my taste, but William says that we are well on our way to being complete this spring. This is wonderful news because come early summer, we will be needing a nursery. Can you believe that, Marian?

Juliet was pregnant. She and William were having a baby. Not that she'd pictured her friend waiting on anything, it was still a strange twisting feeling that filled her chest. Marian let the letter drop to the table below. She would finish it later. That was enough distraction to get past the events of the past hour.

Walking into her bedroom, Marian refused to call on one of the many Blue Fiver maids. She was tempted to go down below, call a hansom cab and go home. Under her feet, a loud clatter of plates and laughter destroyed any hope of her being able to leave unnoticed. She had almost forgotten that directly below there was a wide assortment of London's most powerful males. Marian was angry, confused, and a little sad, but she wasn't stupid.

As she dragged on her nightgown, cursing the elaborate ties that held it together, one thing was completely certain. Marian didn't belong here, and it had never been clearer. Letting her fingers run along the walls as she walked, she moved back through the suite that she had called home for three weeks.

Turning over the lettering, Marian wrote quickly, before she lost her nerve.

Mr. Campbell,

I humbly accept your offer of employment and look forward to meeting your granddaughters on my first available day. Happy holidays.

Sincerely,

Miss Marian Wains

Folding the letter, she left it in the stack of items for the maid to take down in the morning. Marian swallowed hard, feeling the finality in her decision settle over her body. This was the right decision, she knew it. She was entering a new chapter in her life. The next in a long line she knew.

Why did it have to hurt so much?

NINE

Marian woke up, rolling over in bed to watch the small window in her quite slowly turn from the soft darkness of twilight to the passionate black of early morning. She couldn't sleep. Her body felt restless, the ache in her body growing with every flash of memory from the night before.

Bohart had kissed her. Bohart had held her. Bohart had pressed her into the sheets with such finality.

It was enough to drive a girl mad. In the back of her mind, she felt hesitation. She had wanted him, wanted to embrace him not as the beginning of another new life, but because she was wildly attracted to him.

She had lived her whole life until now as the perfect, posh, posed princess that she'd been trained as. It was time to get what she wanted.

Throwing back the covers, Marian went to find Bohart.

He wouldn't be in bed; the club had closed only an hour or so before. Foregoing a robe, Marian slid on her slippers and slowly descended the steps, glad to find the narrow hall to Bohart's office below abandoned.

Moving quickly, she stole into his darkened retreat, the only light filling the empty space was the streetlight directly outside of his corner office, and a small stove in the corner. The wide couch was made up like a bed, probably by John's quick thinking. She knew that Bohart slept here most nights before Abigail had appeared, his inability to pull himself away from the business below not a desire, but a need.

Even now it pulled at the carefully constructed chord around her heart. The man who had everything, except for a reason to come home at night.

Walking to the couch, Marian pulled up the blanket now covering it, bringing it to her face and inhaling the musky, cigar-scented smell that was Montgomery Bohart. It was intoxicating. Filling every part of her with the thought of him.

Moving quickly, Marian slipped between the blankets, enveloping herself in a cocoon that was Bohart. Sighing blissfully, she settled in.

The club had been quiet that night, and he had almost closed them down early. Christmas eve, he noted as the clocks rang out at midnight. Why did this holiday suddenly have so much weight with him?

It was frustrating. Especially after his slip-up with Marian the night before. The feel of her against him, not only had it aroused every part of him, but it had blanketed his life with a sense of rightness that made him anxious.

He had decided long ago that his lifelong love would be the business. And then this slip of a woman had come into his life. Rearranging his furniture, not only in his home but in his mind. Leaving these gaps of possibility. He blamed her for these thoughts, these wonderings.

The change was terrifying. To challenge the comfortable, the safe, was so far outside his realm of interest. But now, there was something there. Tugging. Pulling. Driving him to ask these damned questions.

First, it was whether or not he truly didn't want to have children. Before Abigail, before Marian, he was set on it. There was no need for a bastard to have an heir. Even a bastard as wealthy as him. Providing for Abigail, for Martha, had been enough before Marian came into his life.

But what would Marian look like pregnant with his baby? The thought haunted him. Almost as much as the thought of waking up beside her every day. What could that be like?

From the moment he'd swept her up off the floor, her beautiful face twisted and fierce as she fought for her friend, he'd been lost. It was only now that the realization was taking root.

One did not "get over" Marian of Devonshire. And no matter what those dandies in her sect thought of her, she was everything a man would want in a wife. Her kind eyes, loving touch, those incredible blue eyes. It was enough to haunt his every thought and dream.

Suddenly his couch felt lumpy, his office cold, and his life, it felt too orchestrated and careful. It needed more, and it needed Marian.

As he trudged up the stairs to his office to drop off paperwork, he wondered if she was okay. He regretted everything the night before, except for stopping her. He wanted her, more than he had ever wanted anything, but he didn't want it to be a moment's thought. It should be thought out. That's how Marian worked, and he loved it. He wanted to honor that.

Walking into his office, he tossed his overcoat off, yanking fiercely at the tightly tied cravat around his neck. The softest noise alerted him that something was amiss. Twisting deftly, Bohart realized that there was someone tucked into his makeshift bed, a heavy length of blonde hair spread out on the pillows.

Marian was there, her slight form curled into the blankets John had spread across the couch before he left.

His chest tightened as he looked down at her form. He couldn't help himself, he dropped his weight on the edge of the sofa, letting his hand boldly stroke her hair. In her sleep, those swoon-worthy lips curled in the ghost of a smile. It sent a shock straight to his heart, and another to his groin.

"Marian, darling, wake up," Bohart attempted to wake her softly, his fingers toying with a wayward curl. The epithet slipped out as naturally as his breath.

Marian groaned, her body arching away from him in protest. It made him grin at her, that spicy, bodily response to his request

“Darling, please.” This time Bohart let his head drop, his breath warming the skin of her exposed neck as he leaned over her.

The edges of her eyes opened a bit, sliding over his body to look up. Immediately brightening when she saw who he was. His heartbeat was heavy in his chest.

“Mr. Bohart,” she murmured, her voice slurred, sleepy. That bolt of lightning struck him again, causing him to shift uncomfortably, his body stiffening as his fantasy of waking up beside her seemed to come to life. To dream that he might have that honor was too much.

“What are you doing here?” Bohart forced himself to straighten, to drag his mouth away from her prone skin.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ve come to finish what we started.” Marian’s voice had cleared, her eyes were wide, awake, focused. Her hands slipped from the covers to find him. He took a deep shuddering breath as her swift fingers swept across his belly, his chest.

For as delicate a creature as she, her hands were surprisingly strong, eager, as they moved over his person. He didn’t stop the groan that her touch ripped from his chest.

“Marian,” he warned softly. Perhaps she wasn’t aware of how strained his control already was? He gritted his teeth. “You deserve more than the likes of me. You deserve a title, the life you were raised to have.”

“Says who?” Her voice was gentle, but those hands on her person grew ever bolder.

Montgomery snorted. “Everybody, my darling, everybody.”

“Everybody has always believed they know what’s best for me. That they know what I want. What I should be doing with my life. It’s unfair and cruel. Why don’t I have a choice?”

He grew still under her hands. Slowly her hands slid down her person until they reached the blanket once again.

His voice was rough in the darkness. “You will always have a choice with me.”

“Then let me make it, Montgomery. I’m a grown woman. I know what I want.”

“Just now the ramifications of your choices. It’s not just your life, your heart you toy with.” His breath shuddered out of him.

“Then it’s been decided. I don’t want to leave.” Marian said, pulling herself to a seated position, her body full, plush against his shoulder.

“Darling of Devonshire. You are playing with fire,” Bohart scolded, his willpower burning away. His hands tenderly traced her from beneath the blankets.

“Show me how.” She spoke softly, but every part of his body sang at her words. He was done resisting this feeling, this overwhelming need to make her a part of him.

Show me how. God help him, he would do that and more. Because he was quite sure that no matter what might stand between the two of them, that together, they would be perfectly flammable.

Dropping his face to hers, he let her hesitate. Asking her with his body and presence that he was giving her an out here. She could change her mind. She could walk from this room and they would never speak of it again. He would try to forget the way she’d looked as she asked him to teach her. He’d try to forget what it felt like to have her sweet hands finally on his body.

He would try. There were no promises, but he would be a better man for her. For his Marian.

The moment grew long as he waited. Then with a moan, she wove her fingers into his thick auburn curls and arched her body into him. Her answer, her response, was as clear.

With a groan he gave in, his powerful hands finding her beneath the blankets to haul her up against him. His mouth, strong and sure captured her lips. Their silken heat beckoned him to more. He could drown here, surrounded by this sweet, begging heat.

Pulling himself away, there was one thing, and he needed it more than anything else. He wanted to be with her, against her, no clothing between. Stepping to the door, he flipped a lock. Marian’s

lips curled as she watched him come back to the couch. He was swaggering, he knew it, but couldn't stop himself.

Show me how. Having her eyes on him would make him do about anything.

Reaching for his shirtsleeves, he loosened the buttons as she watched eagerly. Moments later, he slipped his fingers under the hem of his shirt, and with one clean jerk, the offending garment fell to the floor in a pile of white linen.

He was everything Marian had ever dreamed of. As his shirt slowly revealed his torso, her fingers burned with the desire to trace all those lines of muscle across his body. He was beautiful, the soft dusting of red hairs, the widespread ribs, the deep line of body that would lead her fingertips straight to the place she desired to explore the most.

She could feel her cheeks heating, but it did nothing to damper the swirling need in her lower belly. "Montgomery, can I touch you?" she asked softly, her tone reverent.

She thought Bohart had groaned, his body shivering at her comment as he rejoined her on the sofa. Curious, eager fingers stroked across his naked, pale collarbones, tickling as they ran over his chest. But the moment they graced his ribs, she felt his breath begin to catch, as he shifted, sliding his body into her caress.

"Say it again," he commanded, his voice strangled.

"Can I touch you?" Bohart's smile was almost hidden in the dim light, but she felt it in every line of his hard body.

"No. My name."

Her lips quirked. Of course. The sweetness of his given name was new and delightful on her tongue as she shifted on the couch.

"Montgomery. Let me touch you."

His heavy, strong hand was suddenly on her hips, pulling her towards him. Same as the night before, he guided her over his hips,

pulled her to him so that she straddled him against the plush sofa cushions. Her mouth opened involuntarily as she felt the heavy, thick shaft of his heat below her.

That slow, burning heat at the base of her spine had turned into a volcano, turning her body to fire and desire. She ground herself lightly against him, getting a feel for his body beneath hers.

“Easy there, love,” Bohart warned, his hips holding her still as his breath caught. Marian loved evoking this reaction and immediately set out to do it again.

This time Bohart yanked her closer, his hands fisted into her length of loosened hair. His lips devoured her as she pushed the curve of her hips into his belly, savoring the rigid length she found there.

He tugged a little, quieting her hips as she pulled back to focus on his lips.

“Do you want me? I need to hear it from your lips, Marian. I need to hear you beg for this.” Bohart was practically growling. He dipped his head as his teeth raked across her collarbones.

“Hmm...” Marian trailed off, her mind unable to focus on anything except for his mouth, and the path it burned across her skin. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, relishing in the strength there. Marking it as her own. Him as her own.

He tightened his grip on her hair again, pulling her back to meet his eyes. Pain met pleasure in a resounding clap of their bodies grinding together.

“Say you want me,” Bohart’s rumbling voice was thick, aroused against her ear.

“Yes, a thousand times over.” Marian gasped, her hands gripping the bulk of his shoulders.

Snarling like an animal set loose, Bohart pulled her against him, with one hand freed, he yanked down the offending sleeves of her nightgown, freeing her breasts to the cool night air. Before she could react, his mouth, hot, wet heat, closed around the tips.

Letting her head fall back, Marian let instinct take control, her

hands winding up to get a grip on Bohart as he continued to worship her breasts with his sucking, laving tongue. Her hips, unbidden, continued to grind against him, seeking out a way to relieve the incredible pressure that burned between her thighs.

One heavy hand slid up her thigh, directly under her nightgown, to find the softness of her backside. Gripping it, Bohart groaned into her mouth. With a roll of his own body, he pushed himself against her. His rigid hardness to her silken soft.

With a quick yank of fingers, Marian freed herself from her nightgown, Bohart's actions temporarily halted as he was struck silent by the exposure of her body to his eyes.

Marian watched him examine her, her eyes heavy, lips parted as she panted. Bohart's face was one of pain, acute torture, as he looked at her.

"This is what I want. Please, Montgomery, I ache," Marian whispered, her words honest, open. Bohart's eyes closed gingerly as if he was scared she might be gone when he opened them next. Marian let him savor the moment, the conclusion that they had both ached for.

His eyes eased open, the bright iris burning into hers. With one move, Bohart stood off the couch. Marian shrieked, tightening her legs around his hips as he carried her easily out of his office, and up the stairs.

Marian wanted to scold and yell at him, terrified they might run into someone else, but her lips were held captive again as he kissed her. Moments later they were safely on the correct side of his apartment, yet Bohart didn't stop, carrying her straight back to his rooms. Abigail's door stayed safely shut.

He laid her tenderly across his bed, and when he stepped back and grinned at her, it did things to her that she couldn't understand. How is it possible to want someone so deeply?

He took his time, examining what felt like every part of her body. She began to squirm on the bedding, the ache in between her legs making her restless. Bohart grinned at her, his eyes playful as he caught the edges of his trousers with his thumbs. In a show of extreme confidence, he dropped his remaining clothing to the floor with a

flourish. He stood quietly, proudly, as she stared at him.

For a moment, she hesitated, her eyes drawn down over his chest to a flat, clenching belly, to the heavy length of him. He held it, letting his fingers trail over the head as he stared down at her.

He was waiting. She pushed herself up on her elbows, shifting urgent hips against the silken sheets.

“I want it all,” Marian whispered into the darkness surrounding them. Like a trigger, Bohart snapped forward, his body engulfing hers in his heat. His mouth slid across hers, teasing, until she begged again, coiling herself around him to quench this need that spiraled through her.

When Marian felt the length of his body pressing between, she arched her hips desperately. He slid against her, cursing as his arms quivered on either side of her head. Marian could tell he was trying to be gentle, to be slow, but she had waited long enough.

“Easy, Marian, easy.” She had the impression that he might have laughed if there wasn’t so much on the line, too much tension filling the both of them that there was no time for humor. The inevitable pressure driving them every forward.

I had never begged for anything in my entire life. But she would beg for him over and over. If only it brought her the completion she needed. The feel of him against her in the way that only he would know. A tension only he could relieve.

“Please, Montgomery, I can’t wait any longer.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered harshly.

“You could never.” Her hand slipped back into his hair, a soothing, tender movement amongst the passionate, tight grip he held her in.

“I would never. But this may be a bit uncomfortable for a moment.” His jaw was clenched so hard that she was briefly worried for his teeth. The veins in his forehead bulging as his powerful body aligned itself over hers. Everything in him, every tiny piece of flesh she could feel promised pleasure, promised relief from this pounding need.

Marian wound her leg up and around his hip, clenching her body up and around his. With a hiss of pleasure, Bohart thrust forward filling her body with his length. There was a moment of sharp pain, residual pressure that made her breath catch short in her lungs.

Montgomery held himself still, the only movement between was the powerful heaving of his great chest. Soon, her fingers grew curious, sliding up and down the flesh of his sides.

He smiled. Brushing his lips over her forehead, his hips adjusting ever so slightly. Marian grimaced, expecting more pain. But something changed. Every breath he took, every move he made, she felt it, as if he were a part of her. The ache in her belly swirled back through.

Marian let her head fall back onto the bed, raising her hips expectantly to his. A sweet chuckle filled the air, as he gripped her thigh, moving against her. The friction was divine, and Marian found herself unable to stop the bevy of moans and sighs that left her mouth. His body held poised above her, Marian couldn't get enough. She found herself sinking her nails into his back, urging him faster, begging him for more.

He leaned back, his length pulsing directly over the center of her pleasure. The tension in her body threatened to snap at any moment, and she could feel Bohart reaching his limit. In a split second, Marian felt like her world had disappeared, every part of her so focused on the ricocheting pleasure that nearly swept her away. At the core of it, he was there, the solid driving rhythm that drew out her pleasure until she could barely breathe.

Bohart threw back his head, the muscles of his neck and chest outlined in the shadows as he pulled neatly out of her body. Moments later ropes of hot fluid landed across her belly. Above her, he was silent, clenched, even in his moment of release. She watched him in awe.

Feeling deliciously drowsy, Marian observed Bohart coming down from his high, lowering his chest before shifting to the side. Bohart's lips curled against hers, brushing a chaste, sweet kiss upon her mouth. Once, twice, then more than she could count. She savored all of them.

He stood, moving across the room only to return moments later with a small piece of soft fabric, with which he used to clean her up. She watched him carefully, admiring his every move. Filled with an emotion she couldn't place, she let him pull her against his naked body.

"Are you alright?" she whispered against his skin, loving the feel of his hand stroking her side.

A throaty chuckle escaped him. "That's supposed to be my line, Marian."

"Well, how would I know that?" She pressed a kiss to his chest, feeling the springy red chairs there brush her lips. Curious, she wound her fingers through the hair, earning a moan from her bedmate.

"I didn't picture you for such a tease," Montgomery breathed, leaning in to brush his lips around the shell of her ear.

"Mr. Bohart, what are you accusing me of?" She smiled against his body, languishing in the slow heat that he woke.

Bohart cringed, wrinkling his nose. "All things considered, I think you should probably call me Montgomery."

"Monty, then," Marian teased. He laughed, rolling to his side.

"Please, not Monty. I've always hated that one," Bohart pulled a serious face, staring down at her with something so intense in his gaze. Her chest tightened, and she couldn't stop herself from reaching out to trace his lips.

"Montgomery, then," Marian said softly. His eyes burned into hers as the sun began to peek through his window. "What comes next?"

Catching her hand, he pressed his mouth to it in a warm, enticing kiss. "Whatever you'd like, Marian."

Marian pressed her body against his. "I have a few ideas." Montgomery gave her a wolfish grin as he leaned in for a kiss. The moment his lips met hers, she forgot everything else.

Montgomery woke with a start, flinching at the brightness of the sun against his eyes. He moved to cover his eyes, but his arm was pinned down to the bed. Looking down, affection flooded his body.

Marian was sound asleep, her head pillowed on his long numb arm. Shifting slightly, he let his fingers wander over her hair, spread out around her like a blonde halo.

She sighed in her sleep, gently rubbing herself against his side. Just the thought of her against him sent his mind into a delicious spiral. They had spent the early hours of the morning exploring every part of each other. What Marian had lacked in experience she more than made up for it in enthusiasm.

And besides that, he had to admit that having her curled there, sleeping up against him, was nice. Before now, he had never let any of the women he was with stay with him. But this was different, and he could get used to it.

Looking down at her face, he was startled by how much he wanted to get used to it. Suddenly the club below his feet seemed far away, and Marian very close. He brushed his lips against her shoulder, gently waking her.

Her sleep-filled expression was something he couldn't forget, the way her lips curled so slightly at the ends as she stretched into him.

"Good morning," he murmured, his lips emphasizing the words with a smattering of gentle kisses.

Marian chuckled, shoving playfully at his chest. "How can you be so awake?"

"Benefits of being with someone who needs impressively small amounts of sleep." Bohart grinned.

"A benefit? Are you sure?" Marian flung a hand across her face, tugging the covers back up her body.

He smiled. She wasn't a morning person. The thought entertained him more than it should, given that she was usually so bright and cheerful when he saw her. He tugged the blanket back

down.

“I’m sure. And it is Christmas eve, there’s no time to waste.” Bohart swung his long legs out of bed, moving to his wardrobe and beginning to pull his clothes out. He noticed Marian had peaked an eye out, watching him with rapt attention.

Even just her eyes on him sent desire straight to his groin. Part of him had thought that once they’d been together, the sparks between them would disappear. That they would somehow part after Martha returned, and he would look back this was a pleasure. But now, he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to resist her. Every taste of her left him wanting more.

“Mama, everything is fine,” Marian explained for the fifth time since she and Abigail had sat down at the Devonshire dining room table for their Christmas eve breakfast. “I’m just distracted by the holiday preparations; I can’t wait for tomorrow. Neither can Abigail.”

“I don’t believe you. You seem different.” Lady Catherine pinned her daughter with her steely gaze, missing nothing in the gaunt expression Marian was sure she was wearing. Marian brushed a hand over her hair, smoothing away a few loose hairs, and her mother’s loving concern. She couldn’t handle explaining any part of the confusion that was tearing her apart, so it was better to remain silent.

Laura and Abigail exchanged silly faces across the table, taking advantage of Catherine’s distraction. Marian did smile at that, loving the way her younger sister had immediately bonded with the child. While Abigail was far too serious for her age, Laura seemed to bring out a more childlike demeanor in the girl.

She should discuss setting up some playdates with other children for Montgomery. Surely he must know someone with a playmate for Abigail. Children need other children, that much was certain.

“Mama, can Abigail and I go upstairs? I want to show her all my old dolls!” Laura’s face was bright with excitement.

Abigail looked from Marian to Laura, her sweet face confused but enthusiastic.

“It’s perfectly alright, my love, go on and see,” Marian murmured to the child, reassuring her. Abigail slipped quietly from the table, reaching out to take Laura’s hand as they together walked towards the stairs.

The pair of girls were barely out of earshot before her mother leaned in.

“Out with it, Marian. Something is going on, and it looks like you need to talk.” Lady Catherine let the statement hang in the air between them.

“I don’t want to talk about it, *Mother*.” Marian savagely stabbed at a bit of leftover egg on her plate.

“Ah, so there is something.” Catherine crossed her arms, stretching up and observing her daughter closely. “If you won’t tell me, I’m going to start guessing.”

“Oh, Mama, why? Please just let this go.” Marian dropped her head to her hands, putting her elbows on the table linens. She was tempted to act like a child and cover her ears.

“You leave me no choice, Marian.” She cleared her throat, a pucker in her lips as she watched her oldest daughter. “Did something happen with Abigail?”

Marian remained silent, mentally counting her breaths in her head, keeping a tight hold on her temper and her tongue.

“Did something happen with the Blue Fiver? You know I told both Robert and your father you were safe there, so if it’s that then we have a lot to discuss before we talk to them.”

Marian felt her face grow hot. She refused to move.

“Just as I expected. Something happened with Mr. Bohart then.”

Marian groaned, her fingers tightening against her scalp. Instantly she knew she had played too far into her mother’s game.

“Ah-ha! I knew there was something between the two of you. Ever since that mix-up at Lakeview! And who can blame you? That man is pure sin.” Lady Catherine grinned at her daughter, victory shining from her bright eyes.

“Mama!” Marian clapped a hand over her mouth, staring at her mother in horror.

“What? He is a fine-looking man, no matter the unusual occupation. You would have to be the Queen herself to not be tempted by him. And you, my dear, are no queen.” Her mother took a long sip of tea.

“I was not tempted by him!” Marian squawked, her face blushing bright red.

“Oh, come now, no need to lie, Marian. You’ve never been terribly good at it.” Catherine took a sip of her drink, settling deeper into her chair. “You might as well tell me the whole story, Marian. I’m sure whatever I have in mind is far more scandalous than what you did.”

Marian snorted, the chuckle starting low in her chest and bubbling out. Before she could stop herself rolling laughter filled the room. Catherine was not amused, but seemed content let her get this moment of hysteria out of her system.

Feeling exhausted, and a little overheated, Marian finally quieted. Taking a long, deep breath she met her mother’s steady gaze.

“He’s so different than I expected. He’s supposed to be this bruiser, this creature from the slums. But he’s not. He’s careful and loving and wants so badly to take care of his people.”

Catherine sighed wistfully. “I remember talking about your father like that. But Marian, I remember you saying something similar about Teddy Conning.”

Marian gritted her teeth. “That was a mistake. I know that now. But it’s different with Montgomery. I can’t stop thinking about him. I dream about him. But I don’t know what to do. He’s devoted to the club.”

Catherine gave her a small, somber smile. “We will figure this out. Together.” She reached out a wonderfully cool hand and pressed it to Marian’s hot cheek. “Now, tell me everything.”

Marian leaned into her mother’s kindness, soaking it in. Then she began her tale. Objectively leaving out the magnitude of their interaction yesterday, Marian told her everything. When she had poured everything out, she sagged at the table, afraid to look at her

mother.

“Marian, allow me to speak frankly. Which part exactly should we be most concerned about? The fact that you kissed your employer or the fact that you are quickly falling in love with him?”

“Mother! Keep your voice down. Laura might hear! Or Robert, God help us,” Marian hissed at her mother, looking frantically around the first floor. She expected Robert to come marching through the dining room entry any second.

“Calm down, Marian. I didn’t say anything that would shock anybody in this house except for you.” Lady Catherine shrugged her slim shoulders, enjoying watching her daughter squirm in her seat.

Marian grew quiet, pensive. What was the answer to her mother’s questions? Had she fallen in love with the charming club owner?

Bohart hadn’t slept yet. Not since Marian had slipped from his arms, and left the Penthouse. He had wandered the club last night, his mind was hazy and unfocused. It hadn’t gotten better after they closed. It was growing progressively worse. By the time John walked into his office with his daily list of tasks, he was ready to pounce.

“Nice of you to finally show up,” he growled at the steward who blatantly ignored him. John was one of the staff who kept a more normal schedule. He went home each night, arrived each morning. Bohart knew only a few things about the man who orchestrated every aspect of his own life. He’d always preferred that. He thought.

Until now. When he felt like the entire world suddenly pressed its weight against his shoulders. And John perched on the edge of a chair, expectantly looking at his employer.

“Come now Bohart. We both know you aren’t angry at me, so cut out the shouting. Do you want to talk about it?” John’s voice was quiet as always, but with an edge of steel. Part of the reason Bohart had hired the man. He never let up. Bohart shocked even himself when he answered a short, curt.

“I guess I do.” He slammed his heavy frame down in his chair and stared at John. He knew that his eyes would be bloodshot by now.

That combined with the flaming red hair, he was sure that if anyone else were to walk into this room, he would be pegged as an otherworldly demon.

John, bless him, didn't move a muscle. He simply waited.

"I-," Montgomery hesitated. "I kissed Marian last night," Bohart ground out, his teeth gnashing at the words. John remained silent.

"And we are mad about this?" John's voice wavered, a new timber added to it, even as his face remained impassive.

"Of course we are. Or we should be! I have no rights to be kissing a woman like her. Not rights to even consider kissing a woman like her." Bohart growled the response, but something clicked as he spoke. He wasn't angry for kissing her. That feeling, those kisses, he would never be angry over them. This was something else. It felt distinctly like pain, and he rubbed his hand across his chest as he stared down at his steward.

John sighed dramatically. "Permission to speak candidly?" Bohart nodded. "You and Miss Wains have been dancing around each other since the moment she walked through the doors. I do believe that the fact you made it three weeks without kissing each other is impressive."

Bohart started his face heating under his tan skin. He had no idea that their relationship, however new, had been under such scrutiny.

"If you had kissed her last week, I believe that Peggy would've been the winner of our lottery. By delaying a week, you have won me quite a large amount." John gave a thin-lipped smile. "I will consider it a holiday bonus, courtesy of Gerry, the boys in the kitchen, Peggy, Jenkins, even some of the dealers asked to participate."

"But she's never in the club. How can all these people know her?"

"You may not have allowed her in the club during operating hours, but that doesn't mean that she doesn't make her way around the building over time. She's kind, genuine, and leaves quite an impression wherever she goes. And as for the matter of whether or not you are worthy for someone like her. It seems that Miss Wains has

already made that decision for you. Shouldn't you simply defer to her opinion in this case?

It was the most that Bohart had ever heard John utter in a single sitting. And every word of was starkly, completely true. She did leave an impression. In his home. In his niece. Apparently in the Blue Fiver as well.

The ache in his chest eased as he thought of her. Watching her chase Abigail through the Penthouse. Laughing with him over dinner every night. Decorating his apartment because she knew he wouldn't know, and she wanted things to be special for Abigail.

One thing was completely certain. He had to fire her immediately. A smile slowly uncurled on his lips as his plan took form.

"John, I need you to take care of something for me." Bohart leaned across his desk

Marian and Abigail went through the front doors of the Blue Fiver when they returned. Gerry, the front doorman flew out of the club to take Marian's hand as she stepped from the cab. Light snow had begun and the flakes swirled around Marian as she reached back in to usher the child down after her.

Abigail gave Gerry an extra-large smile as she waved at the mountainous man. The man, who made even Bohart look small in comparison, had ended up being one of Marian's favorite staff members at the Blue Fiver.

He was always around to lend a hand with packages, and after an afternoon where he had come to aid Abigail after a trip up the stairs. He had admitted to the little girl that he had two daughters of his own at home, and he was more than used to binding up their little injuries. Marian had watched as his enormous hands had carefully pressed a bit of bandage to her scraped elbow.

She glanced up at the ornate architecture of the club, Bohart's first love, the snow beginning to collect in bright white tufts along the edges. There was so much in this building that wasn't what it seemed. An owner who kissed like the devil. An enormous doorman who bandaged elbows. A cook who snuck in holiday decorations as a favor.

And her, the former Darling of Devonshire, probably the least expected inhabitant. But in the past three weeks, she had found herself happier here than she'd been in years.

Marian liked who she was here. She liked who she was with here. Her school-girl adoration blossomed into a deep, aching desire that seemed intent on staying with her. And not because of his handsome face, or that signature charming smile.

It was something about the way he knew each of the staff member's names and stories. Or how he had tried in vain to learn to braid Abigail's hair. All three of them falling into a fit of giggles when he finally managed a short plait. And then paraded around the penthouse level like he'd won some grand prize for hours afterwards.

He was unlike anyone she'd ever met. As Marian stared up at the club, Bohart's first love Bohart's first love, she felt no shame in her heart. Even her mother had been supportive in her way.

When she had met Teddy, she'd been nothing but a child, focused on all the things that they had told her were important.

What was important? Family. Laughter. Playing. The chance to feel joyful every single day with the person you found.

Titles? Bloodlines? They were nothing but lines to fill the gossip columns. She had already been the source of those sordid gossip sessions before. Was it a coincidence that she'd been happier since she had shaken off the mantle of being a dutiful debutant? Stepping out from under her family's shadow had been the most terrifying and wonderful thing she had ever done.

None of it would've happened without Montgomery Bohart. Not that he knew that. He was married to the Blue Fiver, and she was destined for more than being a mistress. They were two puzzle pieces destined to never fit. But that didn't mean that she couldn't claim one more aspect of her life before this chapter closed.

"Ma'am, are you ready to go in?" Gerry called over one shoulder. He was carrying Abigail up the short staircase into the comforts of the building. Marian shook herself free of her thoughts, and with a sinful smile on her flushed face, she entered the Blue Fiver.

As it was Christmas eve, she was over halfway through their

time here with Bohart, and since their kiss last night, she wasn't sure what to expect from the owner. That said, they had dinner plans for this evening. Abigail had missed her afternoon nap playing at the Devonshire townhouse, but the child was full of giggles and smiles as her Uncle walked in.

Marian was shocked at her body's physical reaction to seeing him so soon. It was as if liquid heat poured down her skin, settling low in her belly like a deep, delightful ache. She bit her lip as he came in. Peggy had sent up dinner, as usual, but Marian had other plans. Abigail had already had her part of the meal and after a short playtime, she would be ready to go to sleep.

Marian was completely prepared to get what she'd been craving for weeks, maybe months. She was going to seduce Montgomery Bohart.

ELEVEN

Bohart found himself being dragged past Marian, who looked divine in a deep scarlet dress, her eyes glowing in the warm firelight. Abigail had a hundred and one different story to tell him, and her voice filled his ears, even as his eyes sought out Marian.

His body ached for her. The skin of his palms burned with the desire to touch her. Every part of his mind, save the part listening to Abigail discuss her day, was honed in on her every move. As soon as Abigail dashed off to retrieve a toy, Bohart approached her slowly.

“Happy Christmas Eve, Marian. How was your day?” Bohart asked, his voice turning her to look at him. He moved to stand directly in front of her. Her pleased and surprised intake of breath heated his blood.

“It was lovely. It’s started to snow again; I always love the snow.” Marian’s body bowed against his, her hands sliding lightly over the edges of his overcoat. She’d been biting her bottom lip, it looked swollen.

“I know you do,” Bohart responded, his jaw tight as she grazed his body with those dangerous fingers.

“Abigail skipped her nap today, it’d probably be best if she went to bed after a bit of playtime,” Marian said the words casually, but it was her eyes that begged for his attention, the lids heavy as she watched his expression.

Bohart nodded, his chest too tight to speak for a moment. Everything in his body screamed to haul her over one shoulder and go marching down the hall to his bedroom and bury himself in her.

Abigail ran back through the room, breaking the moment

instantly. Bohart, not Marian, stepped back. Pushing himself, Bohart forced himself to focus on his sweet niece as she ran circles around their legs happily.

Marian glanced down at the child, a smile tugging at her lips as she looked at the girl with open, honest affection. "Abigail, I think it's about time you get some rest."

Abigail slowed, her angelic face turning glum as she looked at Marian. However, she obediently walked to Marian to take her outstretched hand. The woman leaned down, her eyes bright, and whispered something in the girl's ears.

Abigail smiled and dashed back across the room to her uncle. With a leap, Abigail launched herself neatly up into Bohart's arms, hugging him as best she could with her small arm span. Her chin curled into his chest and that tiny, unforgetting voice whispered, "Goodnight, Uncle Monty." Her voice was muffled into his shirt, but he felt her words so deep in his chest that he almost flinched.

For once he didn't hold back but rather squeezed the girl tightly to his body. Dropping his lips to her curls, whispering back, "Good night, sweetling."

Letting the girl down, he watched her run back to Marian. With a soft smile, they disappeared into the child's bedroom.

Bohart rubbed his chest again, that unfamiliar ache returning. He needed a drink. Walking back to the dining room, he grabbed the crystal decanter off the sideboard and poured himself a stiff drink. While he sipped it, he observed his apartment.

There were a few toys set in a woven basket by the fireplace. Soft, fluffy-looking blankets draped over one side of the sofa. Sweet-smelling evergreens dangled from doorways. Bright candles burned all around him, reminding him not only of the holiday but of the bright souls that had taken up residence in not only his home but also his life in the past few weeks.

It felt good. She felt good.

Even now, her bright blue eyes danced in a beautiful face as she moved about the room. Her hands were busy, racing across the chairs, righting blankets, picking at the edges of tables that had been

knocked astray during Abigail's play.

She was buying time.

His heart raced. She was buying time with him. For a long moment, he just watched. The domesticity in her movements, the comfort her presence, the sound of her movements, even the soft scent of her skin, was enough to calm his senses.

"Marian," he said softly, "Thank you for everything."

She smiled, slowing her efforts to clean the room. Marian raised her arms, motioning around her. "Don't thank me yet. There is plenty more where that came from."

Montgomery's face didn't change. He raised a hand towards her. When she took it, he collapsed back, letting the bulk of his body cradle her as they folded into his favorite armchair. The light from the fireplace danced before them.

"What did you want for Christmas?" He pressed a warm kiss against her neck, making her belly dance under his fingers.

"I will not tell you."

"And why not?"

"Because you cannot share wishes. If you do, they will not come true!" Marian admonished him, her hands tugging gently on his shirt collar. Not to push him away, but to pull him closer.

"Tell me, Marian."

A warm, flickering silence surrounded them. He continued to press kisses to all of the flesh he could find. His mouth growing ever more hungry. He rasped his teeth across the delicate strands of her shoulder. "Tell me."

Marian arched against him, a sweet, tortured sound slipping from her lips. He smiled against her skin, now heated from his touch. "I wanted to know what it was like. To be needed. To be desired. To be wanted in the way that a man wants a woman."

He growled softly, fastening his lips over her pulse as his hands

pulled her tightly against him. “And? Does it measure up?”

“It is more than I could’ve ever imaged.” Marian let the words float into the air as she turned, her knees sliding on either side of his hips as she slid her arms around his neck.

“What do you need, Marian?”

She panted softly against his neck in reply. “All of you. That’s what I need.”

Montgomery’s heart pounded in his chest. More than anything before it was what he wanted to give her. What he craved to give her.

For her, he would give anything. If this he what she desired he would try.

But why, as he rose from his chair, clutching her close as he carried her to his bedroom, did he feel like there was something so final, so resolute in her body that made his mind rise and take notice?

Montgomery laid her across his bed, his every fantasy come to life. He made her beg, made her call his name. Made her wish for him more than anything she’d ever asked for. Only then, he’d slid home, letting their bodies crash together in a clash of pleasure and need so great that it had rattled him to his core.

As he lay beside her after, his body still humming in pleasure as she curled into him, asleep, quiet, a deep, dark clutch of fear gripped his heart. Montgomery Bohart had exposed his heart for the first time in his life. And while he while he was scared, another part of him rejoiced in the simplicity of sharing himself with another.

He had given her everything. Just as she’d asked. Now he would see what came next.

Marian couldn’t sleep. Against all odds, especially the physical ones, she’d remained awake long after Montgomery had succumbed to the bliss of a sleep well deserved. Even now, her cheeks heated against the cool evening.

Montgomery was the lover every young woman wanted. Caring, devious, and deliciously good-looking. He made her head spin

and her body ache for more. But Marin couldn't stop the overwhelming thoughts that pursued her since she came to the Blue Fiver. The club was his life. His great love. And while he had plenty of room in his bed for both, there seemed to be less room in his heart.

Marian swallowed hard. And that's what she needed. She knew now that she could never been just the lady waiting in bed. She wanted more. She'd been made for more. Even now, her skin itched with indecision.

Marian had no place here. Not within the Blue Fiver, and not even with Montgomery, as much as she wished there was. She'd already told the Campbells she'd be their governess, and was expected there soon.

Montgomery's arms tightened around her. Brushing soft lips over his proud nose, she slipped from his arm. She had wanted to be able to make her own choices. But she had had no idea how painful that would be.

Abigail was selecting another book from the shelf with Montgomery came striding into the main living room. The hair on the back of Marian's neck rose instantly. There was something about the way he stood, the way he looked at her that was so different from the night before.

Inside, Marian braced for the worst. Yet it was still nothing compared to what Montgomery turned to her, and said, his voice a smooth, deadly song.

"You didn't even bother to tell me that you are leaving? I had to hear it from Campbell in our monthly update." Marian stood, her skirts flowing around her legs as she leveled Montgomery with her soft gaze. Regret, it filled her cut, making her nauseas.

"My contract here was for a short time. I had to make accommodations, to think of myself. In order to broaden my horizons for the future."

He laughed. It was cruel and broken. "Broaden your horizons? Is that what you think we've been doing?"

“The Campbells are perfectly acceptable employers. I am looking so something safe, something secure for the future.” Instantly Marian wished she could withdraw the words. She could see the impact on Montgomery’s face as his chest heaved.

Safe. Secure. The man who had protected her from the first instant they’d met. She’d struck at his heart. The blow landed hard.

“You came into my life like a runaway horse, changing everything, changing everybody.” He paused, his breath heavy. “Changing me. And now you are going to walk out on us.”

“You do not need me here, Montgomery. You have said time and time again that you cannot give me what I want. Why am I in the wrong when I finally acknowledge that? That I take care of my own future?”

“Because I would’ve moved heaven and earth to change that! And you took it and rolled over to the universe. You showed that lily white belly to the ton and decided that you could not bear to be disgraced by me for a moment longer. And now you are fleeing to Campbell’s influence and safety. I never thought you would stoop so low.”

Marian gritted her teeth, speaking low and slow as Abigail still played on the floor between them. “You of all people should know exactly what people would do for a bit of security. I am no different than you Montgomery, except I do, in fact, have a heart.”

Montgomery slammed his hand down on the table, making both Abigail and Marian jump. “Get out, Marian. Consider your employment terminated.”

Only heartbeats sounded in the silent penthouse.

“I will not leave without a proper goodbye to Abigail.” Marian’s voice was soft, torn.

Montgomery growled, stalking to the door. “Be ready to go in twenty minutes. I’ll have your carriage ready to take you back to where you belong.”

He slammed the door, but not before he heard it, soft as butterflies wings. “I do not belong anywhere.”

He steeled himself against her pliant. She had lied. She had planned to leave him. It was easier this way.

In the dim, wee morning hours of Christmas, Bohart felt that he might have finally pushed himself too far. He hadn't slept since Marian had stormed out the night before and he knew that at any moment his niece would be waking up, expecting to be greeted by Marian and him for her Christmas morning.

But that wouldn't be happening. Not after what he'd done. Honestly, he would be shocked if he was ever allowed near Marian, let alone given enough time to explain himself.

He was slumped in his desk chair when a groggy-looking doorman walked in. Most of the staff had the holiday off, only a front doorman who was essentially in place to deter people from entering the club on the holiday. They would open for business tomorrow when the remainder of the world began to turn again.

"What is it, Frank?" Bohart grumbled, rubbing a hand over his face, hating the feel of his two-day scruff on his cheeks.

"Good morning, sir, Happy Christmas," Frank spoke nervously. He was not someone as used to interacting with Bohart, that much was sure.

"Frank. Out with it"

"There's a Lady Catherine here. Out back." Bohart lurched upwards in his chair. Staring at the dark-haired footman as he shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

"Lady Catherine? You're sure?"

He nodded quickly, clenching his hands in front of his body. "She's got a big 'ole blonde man with her too, but he didn't come to the door."

Lady Catherine. Robert. It had to be him. Adrenaline flooded his body and he vaulted out of his seat. His enormous strides carried him quickly down the hall with Frank's nervous voice chattering behind him.

Had Marian come back? Or was her mother here to give him the tongue lashing that he rightfully deserved for sullyng her beautiful child with his name and body. He grimaced, hoping that perhaps Marian had let that part slide. He didn't welcome Robert's fists, and obviously, he hadn't come over for a casual cocktail.

Throwing open the back door, he almost stumbled over the woman where she stood on his doorstep. Dressed for church, her eyes ranked over him with decisive quickness. He had forgotten how dangerous those blue eyes could be.

She was angry, that much was certain. And for a moment he realized that all the stories about the Lady of Devonshire may be true. Her husband was the businessman, but it was her who people feared. Until now, he had only seen the accommodating, entertaining, and smiling matriarch. Now he was faced with a steely dragon whose greatest treasure he had stolen.

"Good morning, Lady Catherine," Bohart said smoothly, feeling how dry his lips were against the frost of the holiday morning.

Her eyes narrowed. Internally, he cringed.

"No need for polite conversation, Mr. Bohart. I'm here for my daughter. Please retrieve her, as she is leaving. Now." Lady Catherine spoke quietly, but her words seemed to boom through the yard with the power of thunder. Behind him, he senses Frank trying to disappear behind him, obviously not pleased to be dragged into this conversation.

Bohart shook his head. "She's not here, my lady. I haven't seen her since yesterday."

Lady Catherine snorted lightly, disbelief clear across her sharp face. Behind her, Robert stepped forward. His usually jovial face was drawn, grey. Widening his stance, Bohart looked back to Marian's mother.

"I'm not lying. We got into an argument yesterday and she told me she was going home. That's the last time I've seen her." Hearing his words, Lady Catherine's face went dark, serious. Her gaze flickered over him once more before she turned deftly on her heels and reached out for Robert's hand. He moved forward to assist her in walking across the ice-covered path.

“Good day, Mr. Bohart,” she called over her shoulder, not even turning to him. Suddenly it became clear to him. They were there looking for Marian. That meant she had never gotten home yesterday. His breath stalled in his chest, as cold fear slipped into his heart.

He stepped out into the cold, ignoring the bite of winter air on his skin.

“She didn’t come home yesterday, did she?” Bohart was practically shouting now, and he realized he didn’t care who heard him.

Lady Catherine reached the family’s rig. As her son handed her up the steps she turned sad eyes to meet him. Robert turned to face him, his shoulders rolling in obvious distress, and pent-up anger.

“No, she did not.” The words throttled Bohart. He strode forward, the pain overwhelming any self-preservation he had ever claimed. Robert practically growled.

“Let me help. I know people around London. You know that I helped William when Juliet was in danger.”

Lady Catherine stared straight ahead, the door only slightly ajar. “That was different.”

“How?”

“In this case, you are the danger. Robert, let’s go.”

Robert moved forward, his foot on the step.

“Robert, please, I need to help.” Bohart hated his voice, why did he feel so weak. Robert paused for only a moment.

“Do whatever you can, but understand that if anything happens to Marian, I will hold you accountable.” He stepped into the plush interior, slamming the door shut behind him. With a snap of the reins, the carriage pulled away, the wheels leaving almost imperceptible tracks in the light snow that drifted down from the grey sky.

Sleep was long forgotten. He needed to find Marian. He

marched back into the back of the Fiver.

“Frank, get your coat,” Bohart bellowed. Frank, who had fallen in the shadows burst back into his sight.

“Yes, sir! Where are we going, sir?”

Bohart bounded up the stairs to his office, every fiber in his being completely focused on finding Marian. “To see Mr. Vollund.”

“Mr. Jonathan Volund?” Frank skipped along beside him like an over-eager retriever. Bohart didn’t respond immediately, he was donning his coat, hat, and scarf as he stomped through his office.

Returning to a cozily dressed Frank, Bohart looked at him with his brows raised.

“That’d be him. Are you worried?”

Frank straightened. He was a young one, Bohart thought. No more than nineteen, maybe twenty. No doubt he had heard the stories of Jon Vollund. First a spy for the British army, but after Napoleon's defeat, he had returned to London a changed man. Now his capabilities were available, for a fee.

He had been the man, Juliet’s mother, Lady Elizabeth of Greystone had also employed to dig up information on the suspicious actions of her new husband. He was fast, efficient, and his information had always been flawless.

Fletcher had introduced him to the ex-spy almost a year ago, and his services had been a vital part of the membership criteria as well as the use of his information in Marshall Pinecrest’s upcoming trial.

He didn’t bother hailing a cab, and as they marched down the bustling London streets, Frank fell into step beside him easily. Bohart would’ve usually tried to engage in some conversation, but his mind couldn’t stop racing long enough for him to form sentences.

At his core, he was sure that Vollund would know something. Perhaps the man hadn’t had luck finding Martha, but Marian would be an entirely different story. A titled, gentlewoman from a powerful family didn’t disappear without a trace.

Turning a corner, they stopped at a squat, dark-looking three-story home. The iron knocker fell hard against the door, and Bohart grew quiet, pulling each and every one of his emotions carefully inside, tucking them away where they could not be used against him. Vollund was not a man he wanted to have looked into him, and he knew that he needed to keep their meeting today short, and to the point.

Frank fiddled behind him on the stair, snow landing on his uncovered hair. Bohart had brought the boy along in case he needed any help. As soon as he spoke to Vollund he wanted to be able to spring into action.

The door opened a crack, the person within engulfed in shadow. Bohart stepped aside, letting the dim rays of sun filter around him to assure him that the man at the door was indeed Jon Vollund.

They greeted each other stiffly. Bohart had a sneaking suspicion that Vollund didn't like him, and he felt the same way. The man's shifty nature constantly set Bohart on edge.

"Who do you need?" Vollund's breathy, soft voice barely reached Montgomery's ears. He resisted the urge to lean down to hear the man better. He knew the ex-spy would shuffle away from the movement.

"Marian Wains. Of Devonshire. She's been gone for a day, and we need her home." Bohart spoke casually, letting his hand slip into the pocket of his coat.

There was an agreeable feel for the air between them. "Same price as usual." Vollund's mutter affirmed to Bohart that a deal was struck.

He nodded, and the door began to close. Sliding his buckled shoe to block the closure.

"What of my sister? Any more news?" Bohart spoke firmly, not allowing the man to avoid him again.

Silence.

A step, then two, and a bald head slowly came into view

through the crack. Turning his head, looking for all the world like an enormous owl, Vollund set one blue eye on Montgomery. It swept his face once, twice, and then dropped again to the ground.

“I’m not looking for anything on your sister.”

“Fletcher employed you almost a month ago when she first disappeared. He told me himself, don’t you dare lie to me.” Bohart let his voice drop threateningly.

“Stewart Fletcher hasn’t been to see me for months. Nor any of my guys. I don’t know a thing about your sister.”

His heart began to pound, the blood singing a song of rage in his ears. Vollund must be going insane. Of course, Fletcher had been the one to come see him. Otherwise, that meant that it had been almost a month and Fletcher had lied about trying to help him find his sister.

Why would he do that? There was no reason to lie to Montgomery.

“You’ve been played, Bohart,” Vollund breathed as he bumped Montgomery’s toe with his scuffed boots, effectively moving his foot from the doorway. In a moment, the door shut with a deadly conclusion.

Montgomery’s body shook, and not from the freezing weather. Fletcher had lied to him, played him. What would happen if his sister had been hurt, all because Bohart had trusted the wrong man? The implications for this were severe.

“Frank, can you ride? It seems we have an errand to run.” The bright-eyed young man grinned at him, eager to prove himself to his employer.

Marian knew that the Campbells lived outside of London proper, their estate was humble compared to the monstrosity that was Mansfield Park or her friend Nick’s manor at Lakeview. But Peggy had whispered to her that he also kept a lovely apartment closer into town, as well as a small house in Greece where his wife’s family was from. In short, the Campbell’s were more than capable of keeping her on as a governess.

But Marian was part of the point of caring about that. What she wanted was a new challenge, something mind-consuming where she could forget any things about Mr. Montgomery Bohart. Or at least try.

She leaned back into the pillowy seat that filled the carriage's interior. They were headed to meet Mr. Campbell and his granddaughters now, and while the frosty winter air created a grey, dull sky, she felt her body heat at the memory of her last days with Bohart.

First, there had been his lips.

And then... Oh my. That night with him would be something burned into her mind for all of eternity. A burden she was happy to bear as long as she could cherish it. Desire tugged at her brain, her breast tingling as she remembered his bold touches and talented tongue that had mastered over her for what seemed like hours. She blushed to the roots of her hair, and she was secretly glad she had plenty of time before she had to face Mr. Campbell. Time enough to settle down.

To her surprise, the carriage suddenly lurched wildly from side to side. She heard one, then another worried whinny from the horses out front before the carriage began to lean precariously to one side.

"Miss Wains! We've got some wheel problems out here, sit tight while we get 'er fixed up," a deep voice called to her from above, the driver.

There were more loud thumps as he set to work. After a good chunk of time, Marian peaked her head out. She knew nothing of carriage composition, but perhaps there was something she could do. She was a capable woman.

"Sir? Are you alright?" The driver still hunched over the front right wheel, a string of colorful curses flying through the air as snow began to swirl around them.

"I'm not sure, Miss Wains, this one ain't looking right at all." He leaned back on his heels, rubbing chilled fingers against each other. "It's probably best if I start walking back to town, ma'am if we have any chance of getting you out of this weather tonight."

Marian's heart sunk, but she put on a brave smile.

"How far are we from Eastwind?" Eastwind the estate where the Campbells had been living for over a decade. The driver sucked his teeth, his head looking up and down the road, considering.

"It's two, maybe three kilometers down the way, ma'am."

Marian pushed down her disappointment, focusing on her options. Looking into the fading afternoon light. "What else is near here? Perhaps there is something closer."

The driver studied her again, his face worried.

"Begging your pardon, Miss, but I don't think you should be out walking around in the snow." Marian fixed her gaze on him, channeling her best impression of the look her mother had given her thousand times over. It must've worked because he cleared his throat nervously.

"Lord Fletcher's place is a short way back down the road?"

Marian's face whipped the direction he was pointing. Distantly she would see a winding drive taking them off the main road. Fletcher may not be fond of her, but he should have no problems with her now that she has left Montgomery. Plus, he was a gentleman of good standing and a friend of her friend. Surely, he would lend them shelter until they could get the carriage righted.

"I know Lord Fletcher well, perhaps I can walk up and see if one of his people can help us? It doesn't look far at all."

He didn't look convinced, but she could tell his patience was wavering.

"You are a bit better dressed for the weather. What if you try to make it back to London, and I will venture up to Lord Fletcher's home to stay out of the weather. We have a mutual friend."

The driver nodded; his voice stolen as the wind picked up around them. "Be safe, my lady."

Marian nodded, stepping down, her breath puffing out before

her into the winter air. She was dressed warmly, but still dreaded the long walk up to Fletcher's home on the slope behind them.

Shaking her arms, she gave the driver a smile that betrayed how worried she was.

The road was only covered with a slight dusting of snow, and she moved quickly. Even so, the driver was much quicker, and he disappeared in the darkening night as she made the final curve to Fletcher's home.

Relief swept through her body as she made her way up the final steps. The home was expansive, its long twisted steeples reaching into the dark clouded sky. The thick doors were sealed tight. Raising one gloved fist, Marian pounded on the front door. Silence answered.

Marian glanced around, noticing the vacant stables to the right and the lack of footman. Perhaps it was due to the weather, but it wasn't typical. Where were all of Fletcher's staff?

Turning back to the door, Marian pulled back her elbow to knock again when the door creaked open. Staring at her from the other side was a dark, expressive man's face set with an impressive set of thick brows. He was silent, observing her with suspicious chocolate eyes.

"Yes?" He spoke with a heavy accent, Italian, and while he was dressed in finery, it wasn't a uniform. This man wasn't an ordinary footman or doorman. Perhaps a friend of Fletcher's, she wondered briefly, before fixing her best smile on her face.

"My name is Marian Wains. I'm a friend of Lord Fletcher."

The only sound was that over the howling wind as darkness closed around the two of them. His eyes observed her carefully.

"I was on my way to the Campbells, and my carriage broke down on the road. I was hoping to step inside and wait until the driver can return with help?" Marian didn't even mention the option of Fletcher's people helping, if they were anything like this man, they'd never lift a finger.

"Salvatore, don't be rude. Let Miss Wains in out of the cold." Fletcher's polished voice sounded from behind the dark man. Marian sensed a moment of tension, unhappiness from her greeter before he

swung the door wide.

“Come in, Marian, join us for a cup of tea and thaw your hands.” Fletcher stood across the foyer, dressed as if he might appear in front of the Queen at any moment. Marian blinked hard at his finery.

“Am I interrupting something?” she found herself asking as she stepped into the foyer. A surly-looking Salvatore took her coat, scarf, and gloves. Underneath she was dry, but her fingers and cheeks felt cold.

Fletcher ran a hand down his chest, his eyes never breaking from hers. “Not at all. We decided to dress a little dandier here tonight. Special dinner and all.”

Marian nodded, distracted by the odd way his eyes flashed to Salvatore. Something in those eyes made her wish that she was back in her chilled carriage. Determined to not let him see how much she was intimidated, Marian raised her chin, giving him the polite smile that had been trained into her since the first moment she could remember.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Fletcher. Please, continue your dinner as if I wasn’t here. I would hate to intrude.”

“Ah, but you already have, so come in, join us for tea while we wait on dinner.” Fletcher sighed loudly, tilting his head towards a brightly lit parlor to his right.

Marian bobbed a bit at him before striding carefully across the black and white tiled floor. The room spread delicious, frost chasing heat through her limb. She took a deep breath, letting the warmth soak into her soul.

Fletcher had followed her in, ushering her to a small table and the chair closest to the fireplace. The flames almost burned her chilled skin, but it was a pleasurable pain as the feeling slowly returned to her appendages.

Curling her fingers around the teacup given, Marian sent an honest, appreciative smile to Salvatore. He had taken the task of pouring for her, and Fletcher sat half sprawled over his chair as he watched her.

“You’ve left Monty, I see,” he began. Marian almost choked on her tea at the direct, severe question.

“My role at the Blue Fiver was temporary at best. I’m quite excited to get to the Campbells and begin a more long-term assignment.” Marian tried to sound positive, it was hard when a tingle of suspicion, of instinctive fear, fly down her spine at his words.

“As I said, it’s better for all involved,” Fletcher said, looking around the room as if bored.

Marian nodded, pretending to be immersed in her tea. She hated the way this conversation was going. Salvatore sat as still as a statue, his eyes watching her like a predator stalking its prey might.

Fletcher didn’t let silence rest for long, speaking again. “Sal, do you think we should go check on dinner, let Marian thaw out for a moment?”

Marian smiled politely as Salvatore gave a curt nod and stood, walking stiffly to the door. Fletcher promenaded across the room with his usual flair. The door shut quietly behind him, leaving her alone in the parlor.

Breathing deep, Marian tried to calm her racing heart. Something was not right, and she wanted to leave here as soon as possible.

Glancing down at her fingers, she observed her cool, blue nail beds, pursing her lips at the ragged edges of her nails. She had been biting them again, ever since she had decided to leave the Blue Fiver.

Just beyond her hands though, Marian caught sight of something. Another teacup.

THIRTEEN

There was hers.

Fletchers.

Salvatore's.

And *another*, still steaming faintly. Her body tensed, the current of adrenaline making her mind expand. A fourth cup meant a fourth person. Yet they hadn't come to greet her and had fled the space before she was allowed in.

Standing, as if guided by fate Marian began to look over the shelving along the mantelpiece, at the plush burgundy sofas. Behind one was a tall, beveled edge table which displayed a number of small dishes, trinkets and at the end, there was a distinctive dust mark.

As if something there had been only recently moved. Her fingers closed around the knob of the table drawer; she was shaking harder now than she ever had been in the storm. She remembered those cruel, dangerous eyes.

She opened the drawer. It was a frame, and an older one, with three men photographed in it. On the left, a younger version of Fletcher. In the middle was an older man, his arms wrapped morosely around both other men. It was the man on the right that set Marian's pulse racing.

This man was taller than either of the others, towering over them, his face similar enough to the middleman to recognize that they had to have been related. Marian would recognize that cocky mouth, those brightly, wide blue eyes.

He was the spitting image of Montgomery Bohart, the similarities as obvious to Marian as if the man had been standing right in front of her.

Alarm bells went off in her mind, screaming for her to get out of this house.

She gripped the frame to her chest, whirling for the door. Fletcher stood there. His hands were empty, and his legs spread wide, filling the doorway.

“I didn’t do as good of a job hiding that one. But again, you didn’t give us much time to straighten up.”

Marian backed away, watching as his eyes followed her, watching her every move. She was afraid to speak, her throat was clenched tight in alarm. She shook her head slowly.

“I couldn’t believe it was you. After all the trouble I went through to shoo you out the door at the club. And then here you are, standing on my doorstep in the snowstorm. My worst nightmare.”

“What?” Marian choked out, confused. “What is going on?”

Fletcher strode into the room, making a half-circle around her. She turned, following him with her eyes, afraid to let him out of her sight. He snarled at her.

“After all I have done. After everything is put into place. Two women come in and almost ruin all of my good work.” He pulled his lips down dramatically.

Fletcher sat comfortably on one of the sofas, crossing his legs as if he was settling down to a nice dinner with friends. He pointed at her chest, at the frame she still clutched. “My older brother, Harrold Fletcher, he’s on the right. My father, in the middle. And that, of course, is me on the left.”

Marian glanced at the frames, still confused. Her heartbeat threatened to drown out all the other sounds. She shrugged slightly.

“What? You don’t see it? It’s painfully obvious. You lived with the man for three weeks and you can’t look at that frame and see the likeness?”

Marian sniffed hard. “Your brother, he looks exactly like Bohart.”

Fletcher nodded, smiling at her as a teacher might praise a worthy student.

“My older brother was better than me in every way, according to my father. There was one thing, though, that I had over him. Harry was infatuated with a commoner. He claimed he loved her, that she was worth the risk that their relationship posed to his inheritance. Our father was enraged.”

“He threatened to ruin Harry, to make sure he never saw the girl ever again. I, his loyal brother, of course, went to warn him. We devised a plan; he would pull a small amount of his inheritance out and save it for their future. He would voluntarily surrender his claim to the family fortune and be able to live the life he wanted with his *beautiful* peasant.”

Marian’s mind raced, but she remained silent. Watching Fletcher’s face contort as the conversation continued.

“We worked together, we put the money in her accounts, they bought a little house. Everything was ready. Then Harry came home one day with a cough, the next he was in bed with influenza. He was a huge beast of a man. No one expected him to succumb to something as simple as an illness. Nevertheless, he never woke up again. He was gone. And while I hadn’t wanted it to work out this way, I had gotten what I deserved.”

Fletcher gestured around them, the empty house seemed to ignore him, the cold walls covered in shadow. He smiled at her as if it should make sense.

“I don’t understand, why does that matter?” Marian whispered. Salvatore had taken up residence at the doorway, and it was clear that she wasn’t leaving this room until Fletcher deemed it possible.

Fletcher gave a disappointed sigh, clicking his tongue at her. “His lover only showed up here once. She was devastated, begging to see my father, to speak to him about Harry. She claimed that they had been married weeks ago and that she could prove it.”

Fletcher's eyes grew wilder. "Now that, I could not allow. I sent people to their house in the village but found it abandoned. The little peasant was smarter than I gave her credit for. My people nosed around and discovered a variety of baby items in the home. It had always been my fear that he may have gotten her with a child before his death, and now I was deeply suspicious. I spent years chasing rumors of her life all across this country but found nothing."

"Imagine how surprised I was when I attended a boxing match and found myself looking into a replica of my brother's child. His possibly legitimate heir."

Marian's body went cold, goosebumps crawling up her skin as she realized what he had been saying all along.

Fletcher was Montgomery and Martha's uncle. If they were, in fact, legitimate, then the family's estate would fall to Montgomery and his sister. Not Fletcher. No wonder the man was terrified.

And now Marian found herself in possession of the painful, dangerous truth.

"It was too easy to befriend him, to check into his stories. The moment I saw his sister, I knew it had to be true. For as much as Monty looks like his father, Martha is the image of their mother. While I never wanted them to look into their past, I also couldn't leave him there to rot. It was easier to keep track of him if he was at the Blue Fiver. Not to mention he inherited Harry's natural ease of business and mathematics. Bastard."

Salvatore shifted at the door, drawing Fletcher's eyes.

"Why would you tell me this?" Marian hated her trembling voice. Especially since she already knew the answer to the question. He would never let her have the chance to tell anyone, let alone to Montgomery about this revelation.

"Now you see, two women stand directly in the way of all my plans. And I'm dreadfully attached to my nephew, in my way." Fletcher stood, jerking at the ends of his jacket. He turned to Salvatore.

"Put her in with the other. We'll have to wait until after they come looking." Fletcher ordered the other man, who immediately strode

across the room. Gripping her upper arm, he dragged Marian to her feet.

“He’s your family! You can’t do this to family,” Marian said aloud, her body twisting as she fought to keep a hold of the photograph.

“As I said earlier, it’s better this way.” Fletcher didn’t even turn to look at her. Salvatore dragged her in front of the room as if she were nothing but a limp doll. “At least for me.”

Salvatore moved down the hall to a set of winding stone stairs lit by flickering scones. He growled at her if her feet slipped but together, they made it down the stairs, and at the first door made of ancient wood closed behind her. Salvatore was back out and she could hear the distinctive click of a clock settling into place as she turned to see her surroundings, fearing the worst.

The room was sparsely furnished, a pair of rickety beds along each wall. A small stove burning in the corner, where a gaunt face woman stood, her thin body backlit by the smoldering air.

“Who are you?” Marian shouted; her voice hoarse with fear.

“My name is Martha Bohart.” Martha stepped forward, holding her hands out in front of her. “I’m a prisoner here too.”

Marian frantically looked around them, waiting for more strangers to come out of the shadow.

“It’s only us. I’ve been alone here until now. Except for Fletch and Salvatore, that is.” Martha spoke gingerly as if her voice hadn’t been used recently.

Marian felt faint, the only thing grounding her was the harsh, sharp edges of the frame which she had managed to keep. She swallowed hard, feeling the angry, fearful tears welling up in her eyes.

“Are you...are you Marian?” Martha asked tentatively. Large, wide-set blue eyes became visible as she moved to stand closer to Marian. Feeling a little less than gracious, Marian stepped back again, barely resisting the urge to run to the other side of the room.

“You must be. Fletcher has been talking about you for weeks.

He was so worried you were going to interfere with Monty. They say he's half in love with you already." Martha took another small step forward. Marian didn't know what to say.

"Yes, I'm Marian. Marian Wains. Fletcher didn't seem to like me very much. But this seems like quite a leap from dislike to imprisonment."

Martha shrugged. "He's desperate now. I can feel it. Fletcher's pockets and reach into the black market go far deeper than either of us ever knew."

"How do you know so much?"

"They still have me take meals upstairs with them as if I am simply an awkward guest here. I think it makes them feel better about locking me down here the rest of the day."

Marian swallowed, gathering her courage. "Did Fletcher tell you I've been watching Abigail?" Her throat was already dry again, fear threading through her body. She looked over at Martha. While Martha looked a bit like Montgomery, Marian most saw Abigail's features there, flashing under the smooth, fair skin. It was no surprise that even half-starved and neglected, Martha Bohart was a beauty.

Martha's eyes flew wide. "No. He didn't! Where's Abigail? Is she safe?"

"Yes, yes. She's safe with Montgomery in London. I was on my way to my new opportunity with the Campbells."

Martha nodded. She reached out and gripped Marian's arm. Her fingers were cool to the touch, but the affection steadied Marian's heart. Martha gave her a tentative smile.

"How is she? My baby? Could you tell me please?"

Marian smiled, wiping her tears with the back of one hand. "She's alright, healthy. She misses you so much. Your brother does too."

Martha nodded, her own eyes filling with tears. "I miss her too. God, I cannot wait to hold her again." She looked at Marian curiously. "How did you find me here? Is Monty coming?"

Marian shook her head sadly. "Pure, horrible coincidence. He doesn't even know where I am." Realizing that Montgomery wouldn't be blazing in to save the day any moment must've been the final straw for Martha. She stepped back, letting her knees bend to sit on the edge of one bed. Eyeing Montgomery's twin carefully, Marian moved to go sit on the other bed, facing her.

Silent tears slid down Martha's face.

"Montgomery tore apart half of London looking for you," Marian said softly.

Martha chuckled weakly, thick with tears. "Of course he did. He's not used to people taking things from him."

Marian felt her lips pull into a smile. No, that he isn't, she thought to herself.

"How long have you been here?" Marian asked the woman.

"I'm not sure what day it is. It's been a bit of a blur."

"It's December twenty-sixth," Marian explained gently.

Martha flinched visibly. "Over three weeks then."

"But why? Why would he take you? Fletcher seems to genuinely care about you and your brother. Locking you up. Lying to him about searching for you. It's all so evil." Marian couldn't stop herself from asking.

Martha gave her a rueful smile. "Because, unlike my older brother, I sometimes act before I think."

"I assure you, he does that as well," Marian grumbled. Martha observed her with knowing interest before taking a deep breath.

"I am sure he already gave you his part of the story, eh?" Marian nodded. "Earlier this month, I was cleaning out some things leftover from Mama, and this tiny scrap of paper slipped out." Martha held up her hands, dropping them sadly to her knees. "It was a marriage certificate for the year before Monty and I were born."

Marian took a sharp breath.

“It listed Harrold Fletcher as the groom,” Martha finished, looking at her across the room, sadness creasing her eyes.

“Fletcher’s older brother?” Realization stirred Marian’s belly into a pit of chaos. “You went to Fletcher to ask him about it, didn’t you?”

Martha nodded. “He laughed me off, telling me that I must’ve been crazy. He told me I shouldn’t bother Monty with my crazy ideas about Harrold.”

“It started making me nervous, so I agreed, tried to make him believe I would let it go.” Martha shook her head sadly. “But I saw Salvatore on my walk back to my place. That man never means well. I got home, hid the marriage certificate, and rushed to drop off Abigail at the Blue Fiver. I thought that if I disappeared for a few days, I could put a few bits and pieces together, then tell Monty what I knew.”

Marian’s chest grew tight.

“They were waiting for me in my apartment after I dropped off Abigail. Salvatore, Fletcher, a few others, I never saw their faces. They brought me here, and I’ve been here since.” Her shoulders shuddered involuntarily.

“I’m so sorry, Martha. What a horrible thing to go through.”

“It’s my fault,” Martha said hushed, “I should’ve gone straight to Monty when I found the certificate. But I wanted to do this for him. He’s always been so strong, so sure. I knew that this would mean the world to him.”

Marian smiled at her sadly. “I understand. I would’ve done the same thing for my brother.”

“Fletcher can’t find the certificate, and he doesn’t know what to do with me. As far as kidnappings go, this one seems to be fairly amateur. He can’t let me go because he won’t give up the estate, the title, everything to Monty. The law is the law, and my brother is the rightful heir.”

Marion’s jaw felt loose, slack as she stared. “Montgomery is the

rightful heir. I can't believe it."

"Neither will he. Or anyone else for that matter. That is why I took the license. We needed to have proof if we wanted to challenge something like Fletch." Martha let out a long sigh.

Silence weighed on their shoulders. A deep weariness settled over Marian, settling grimly on her heart as she stared at Montgomery's twin. At his chance to know who he was.

"Is it only Fletcher and Salvatore here? In the whole house?" Marian asked, shaking her arms to send the cool blood running once more.

Martha's eyes were dark, tired. "Yes, I believe so. Fletcher usually has a large number of staff, so he must've sent them elsewhere when he brought me here. This room is quite close to the servants' quarters, so it would've been impossible to explain away my presence here."

"We have to make a plan. With two of us now, there has to be a way to get you out of here. The truth must come out."

Martha blinked at her. "Why not you?"

"I've only gotten here, and I don't know much about this land. I would sooner end up in Spain than make it back to London proper."

Martha twitched her lips, a half-smile beginning across her face. She was quite handsome, her face a bit too broad for traditional delicate beauty, but her eyes, her lips, they were lovely. She stood and came to sit beside Marian on the bed.

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Marian laughed softly, looking down at her hands. They lay, cold and pink on her lap. Tears burned behind her eyelids as she nodded jerkily. "Is it so obvious?"

Martha stroked her forearm, bringing Marian's eyes up to meet her own. "I'm sorry. He's not an easy man to love."

"Quite the contrary. In my case, he's been too easy to love." The tears left a hot, salty trail down her cheeks. Martha gave her a

somber smile.

“Perhaps I will need to be introduced to this new Montgomery Bohart. They always said a man in love is a different man altogether. I am guessing that having someone like you in his life might have been what he needed.”

“What do you mean? Montgomery doesn’t need anybody.” Marian sniffed.

“Oh yes, yes he does. Monty has been, well, stuck, for years now. Always looking for something. First in his business, then in the Blue Fiver. But those things aren’t real, they aren’t what carries you through this miserable life.”

Marian stared. “I’m not following. He loves the Fiver, he’s devoted to it.”

“Monty has been looking for love. A secure, deep, mind-consuming love. In its place, he pushes all kinds of other things, but nothing fills him up completely. Except, it seems, maybe you. Something makes me think that you might have been exactly what he needs.”

Another tear slipped down her face.

“Let’s hope that he comes looking for you quickly. It’d be nice to not have to walk back to London.” Martha bumped her shoulder gently.

Marian chuckled. Shaking her head, Marian took a deep shuddering breath. “Until then, we need a plan.”

Marian quirked an eyebrow. “We need a good plan.”

Turning to face her on the bed, Marian gripped her hands. “Tell me everything you know about this place. About Fletcher and Salvatore,” she told Martha. Martha nodded and began to tell Marian everything she could think of about Fletcher’s home, and the past three weeks of her capture.

FOURTEEN

Montgomery and Frank, his young footman, had quickly gone by the Blue Fiver to inform the rest of the returning staff that they would not be open today. While many had looked at him blankly, he had finally shouted for someone to bring him Peggy.

While he saddled his horse and helped Frank select one of his own, he drew up a rough plan. Something nefarious was going on. First Martha, now Marian. The people he cared about more than anything were disappearing.

Peggy strode into the stables, her usually serious face was drawn, worried.

“One of the girls told me that Marian is missing. What is going on?”

“I’m not sure, but I have a bad feeling. I’m taking Frank and going by the Devonshire place to see if Robert can join us. Then we are headed to Fletcher’s home.”

“Fletcher’s? Why?” Peggy’s voice rose, and Montgomery held out a hand to quiet her.

“I don’t have time to explain, but I need you to close everything down here. Keep Abigail with you at all times. I don’t trust anybody else right now.”

Peggy agreed, nodding heartily. “I’ll go get her now. She can stay with me down in the kitchens until you return.”

Montgomery finished with his saddle and went to lead his horse from their stall.

“Montgomery.”

Montgomery lifted his head, startled by the emotions in his manager’s voice. She had always starchy refused to call him by his first name, even after his insistence early on.

“Bring her home safely.” Peggy swallowed thickly.

“I plan on it.” Montgomery swung aboard his dark brown gelding, turning to look over his shoulder for Frank. He appeared instantly, his chestnut glowing red against the dusting of snow on the cobbled yard.

They were ready. A short ride across town and they were staring down the neat brick facade of the Devonshire townhouse. Instead of the usual uniformed man at the door, Robert opened the door to Montgomery’s stony face.

Taking a deep breath, the blond man took him in slowly. “What did you find?”

“It’s a long story. Can you ride?”

“I’ll be right out.” Montgomery didn’t flinch as the heavy door was shut directly in his face. Turning to glance at Frank, who pretended not to notice. It was obvious that Marian’s brother was still displeased with him, to put it lightly.

And he had every right to be. But he could be mad later. Hell, he could throw a few punches later. After they had safely returned Marian. And if his instincts were correct, Martha as well.

Robert joined them within a few minutes, dressed for the winter weather, and on top of a snorting dragon of a stallion. Ignoring the horse’s antics, Montgomery gestured to join him and Frank.

“We’re headed to Stewart Fletcher’s place, outside of town proper,” Montgomery spoke loudly, over the brushing of the midday wind.

Robert’s face was murderous. “You’re sure about this, Bohart?”

Montgomery nodded, turning his horse quickly to begin their path. They had a lot of ground to cover and he couldn’t waste another minute chatting. Robert and Frank fell in behind, and together the

three of them rode to find out what exactly Stewart Fletcher was hiding.

“Alright, are we ready? You said he usually comes down for breakfast.”

“Yes, every morning so far.” Martha paced back and forth across the floors, her smudged skirts billowing around her legs with every quick movement. She was nervous, Marian could tell, and she wished she had the words to soothe the other woman, yet she was just as nervous.

Marian took a breath, holding it until her chest began to ache. This was the only way, and after she and Martha had stayed up late yesterday discussing options for her escape, they had ended up going with the oldest, simplest method in the book.

Now that the minutes ticked by until Salvatore came downstairs it seemed like there was no way that it could be enough. How could it be? She was barely over eight stone. Salvatore outweighed her in every fashion.

She tried to stay confident, reminding herself that, unlike Salvatore, Marian was fighting for her freedom. She hoped it would be enough to balance the strengths.

There were heavy footfalls outside the hall. Salvatore must be coming down. Martha looked stricken. Marian closed her eyes, moving near the fire and laying down upon the harsh wooden floors. She pictured Montgomery. She pictured Abigail, her mother, Robert. Anything to give life to her mind and chase away the feeling of impending doom.

The door swung open, and Salvatore must’ve walked in.

Martha rushed to him, her voice full of panic. “Where have you been? I’ve been calling for hours.”

Salvatore’s thick voice was low, bemused. “You don’t control me, woman. Now shut up and back away.” He kicked at the door with a heavy grunt.

“That girl, the one you brought down here yesterday. Look at her. She’s been like that for hours.”

The tray crashed down on the table and the henchman hurried to her side, his movements frantic. “What’s wrong with her?” His growl raised the tiny hairs along Marian’s arms as she steeled herself for his touch.

He gripped her shoulders and rolled her to her back, staring at her with wide, dark eyes that were filled with fear. Not fear for her, but fear of ramifications from Fletcher. Marian hesitated, keeping her eyes closed tightly, giving Martha a hair more time.

“Wake up, girl.” Salvatore shook her roughly, his fingers bruising her upper arms. Quick as lightning, Marian opened her eyes, reaching up and clenching her hands around Salvatore’s short hair. Leaning back, Marian gave his scalp a hearty yank, digging her nails in for emphasis.

Salvatore reared back in surprise as Marian wrapped her skirted legs around his thigh. She wasn’t heavy, and she wasn’t necessarily strong, but she knew that winding around him like this was the absolute best way to throw the larger man off balance. Martha was off and running, her boots lightly stepping up the stairs as she fled the basement rooms.

Salvatore roared as he tried to stand, his shoes tangling in her skirts, and his upper body awkward with her clinging to him. He stutter-stepped and then stumbled, smashing Marian against the floor as he tried to free himself from her.

Marian knew that she only had to buy Martha a few more moments, and she dug in, clenching her muscles around his flailing body. It worked, and she closed her eyes in relief and warning as Salvatore was able to pry her fingers away from his thick neck. Immediately Marian dropped her legs, letting the man step away from her, counting on his anger to propel him away from her.

She was wrong. In a startling move, Salvatore backhanded her, the stinging pain sending shock waves through her body as she skidded across the floor. Scooting away, she pushed herself away from the furious man. As she hit the wall, he kept coming, reaching down to grip the front of her dress.

The brute hauled her up until the tips of her toes barely brushed the floor. Marian could distinctly feel the right side of her face swelling, the sweet heat of it a welcome distraction from the heart-wrenching fear that pounded through her body.

Salvatore's chest heaved, his stance wide and wild as he held her up against him. From above a smooth, familiar voice drew his attention.

"Sal, what's taking you so long?" It was Fletcher. He didn't come down the stairs, but rather was calling down to his man from the top of them. Turning from Marian, Salvatore dropped his grip, letting her slide down to the floor. Marian pressed herself away, feeling the thick, cold wall at her back.

"Martha is gone, it's the other one's fault," Salvatore called back. There was a muttering string of curses that followed and then quickly retreating heels across the polished upstairs floor.

Salvatore looked back to her; his face murderous. "Don't move." Salvatore stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Marian shook her head, fears slowly falling out of the eye that wasn't swelling. It wasn't pain, but the heart-pounding realization that she may not have bought Martha enough time. Holding her breath, she waited for any type of confirmation that they had found Martha.

But nothing came. Distantly she heard the pitter-patter of feet against the upstairs, but there was nothing else. Marian was glued to the spot against the wall for almost an hour before she stood and found her way to her bed. Martha had to have made it, her heart rejoiced even as her fingers gently felt around the hot, painful knot on the side of her cheek.

Sniffling back tears, Marian curled on the thin mattress, pulling a pitiful-looking quilt over her form. Rubbing the good side of her face against the bed, Marian tried to picture Montgomery, Abigail, her family.

Their faces flew past her eyes as she waited. Surely Martha would be far ahead of Salvatore and Fletcher. They had no other option. She had to make it to safety.

Montgomery had caught Robert up on the walk breaks for their horses. They had passed quickly through the bustling city, the weather closely turning grey, as billowing clouds filled the December sky. Robert agreed with him, no matter what it seemed odd the Fletcher hadn't told them the truth. And it was quite convenient that Fletcher's home was on the way to the Campbells and Marian's new role as their governess.

Together the three men rode hard once out of the city, pushing their horses in the afternoon chill. Each stride took Montgomery closer to Marian, to Martha, he could feel it.

They pulled up their horses as they passed over an arched bridge, the road growing slick as they crossed the waterway. As his gelding slowed to a walk, Montgomery could've sworn he heard something. Turning his head, he scanned the landscape.

The noise came again. A woman's voice, he was sure of it.

"Marian, is that you?" Montgomery's shout echoed off the surrounding trees. Robert and Frank halted behind him, their serious eyes scanning the surrounding hills.

"Montgomery!" His sister's voice was suddenly so close, he was off his horse, and running through the blistering wind before his mind could react. She was running down a slope, her dark dress illuminating her against the snow.

Martha never broke her stride as she reached Montgomery, her body throttling into his as she wrapped her arms around his chest. Her dark hair filled his nose as she pressed herself against him, a stream of words continuously washing over him.

"Martha, slow down, slow down. You're safe now," Montgomery whispered, stroking his twin's back, trying to soothe the chattering woman. She quieted finally, her body shaking against him. Whether it was from the cold, or whatever she had run from he wasn't sure.

Montgomery murmured something soothing as he turned to glance at his two companions. Robert and Frank stood nervously, still mounted on their horses.

"It was Fletcher, Monty. He followed me home, took me out here." Montgomery felt his temper rise in his chest, as bright and inflamed as the sun itself. He needed to know why. He needed to understand why his closest friend would ever do such a thing.

"Did he hurt you?" Montgomery asked, his voice low, dangerous.

Martha shook her head, stepping back from his body so that she could look at his face more easily. "You have to go, Marian is there."

Robert whipped around, his hands right on this stallion's reins. "Marian is where?" He was looking at the hill behind Martha as if his missing sibling might appear at a moment.

"He has her. Keeping her trapped in the basement. She helped me escape." Martha's voice was shaking, her emotions overwhelming her body.

Montgomery gripped her shoulders, urgently turning her back to face him. "Is she okay?"

"She was when I left, I've been running. But Fletcher has lost his mind, he's acting like a crazy person."

Montgomery frowned, leaning back. Robert called out. "Which way Bohart? I'm going to get my sister."

Robert legged his mount forward, eagerly awaiting Montgomery's direction. "We'll go together," Montgomery announced. "Frank, take my sister home immediately. Straight to the Blue Fiver." He turned to his twin. "Abigail is safe with Peggy. She needs you."

"Monty, I have to tell you what happened. What I found."

"Another time, Martha, I need to get Marian out of there."

"I know, but this is important," Martha swallowed hard, her wind-whipped air flying around her face. "Fletcher is our uncle, our father's brother."

Montgomery's mind reeled. "What do you mean?"

"I found the marriage certificate. We aren't Boharts, we are Fletchers. Legitimate Fletchers." Martha's voice was excited, racing over the words as they tumbled unbidden into the winter air. Montgomery sensed Robert turning to them in interest, his head tilted to listen.

How could this be, Montgomery wondered. His father had always been a closed subject, forbidden by their mother to ever be spoken of. They had taken her last name, Montgomery, and even when she had died from scarlet fever, the other family members had expressly turned them away, claiming they knew nothing.

"Why would she hide this?" Montgomery finally uttered.

Martha shook her head solemnly. We can talk about this more later. Fletcher told me everything. He's unraveling Monty, I don't know what he's capable of. You have to get her Monty; she is a special one." Martha said softly so that Robert wouldn't hear.

Montgomery nodded his jaw set and tense. His uncle. He still couldn't wrap his head around it.

"Frank!" Montgomery shouted for his footman. "Frank, this is Martha, my sister. I have someone I need you two to retrieve right now." Montgomery leaned down, whispering in his sister's ear. When he straightened, Martha's face was blank, confused.

"Trust me," Montgomery said simply.

Frank nodded, his pink cheeks flushing deeper as Martha's eyes flitted over him curiously. She raised one brow, smiling at her brother in silent questioning.

"You'll be safe with Frank. Trust me." Montgomery whispered the last part, his voice was tight with restrained desire. He had to leave, now. Daylight was fading fast, and the thought of Marian spending another moment trapped in that house burned him from the inside out.

"Go, go now." Martha urged him, then she shoved at him with her cold-reddened hands. She stepped towards Frank as Montgomery swung up on his horse easily.

“Monty. He’s not who you think he is, don’t forget that.” Martha shouted after him. She knew he heard, but he never turned around. He and Robert broke into a gallop as soon as their hooves were on solid ground.

The chill going down Montgomery’s spine had nothing to do with the fact they had been out in the English weather for longer than either of them ever desired to be. Fletcher’s home, an ancient stone manor, was usually a source of entertainment, filled to the brim with staff, friends, guests, and events. It was the perfect location for those London guests who wanted to get out of the bustle of town but didn’t want the remote nature of the country.

An eternal bachelor, Fletcher’s home was one step from being its club, in Montgomery’s opinion. But that’s how Fletcher had preferred it. He claimed a boring, unsatisfying childhood had turned him into a carouser. His life was ruled by passion, pure and simple.

When Montgomery and Robert entered the gated from gardens of Fletcher’s home, it was completely desolate. The stable was dark, empty. There was not a single light burning in any of the main windows from the front.

If Martha had not come straight from this location, Montgomery would’ve never guessed anyone was in residence or had been for a long time. They had taken some time to stow their mounts, set a plan before they carefully walked up the front entrance. As they approached the door, Robert’s strong, solid presence at his back, Montgomery had a nagging doubt pull at his mind.

Surely this was all some mistake. It didn’t look like anyone had been here for weeks.

Foregoing the knocker, Montgomery simply pulled at the heavy oak door, its hinges giving eagerly to the man. Stepping in, flakes of snow following them to their end, the men walked into the home. Montgomery hesitated, leaving the door open a crack. There was a voluminous fire going in the parlor to the back, and some of the scones along the hall leading flickered with dim, poorly maintained flames.

There were leaves and bits of debris crunching under their

boots. Montgomery glanced at Robert to assure him of their destination, but the lord's eyes were focused solely on the parlor. They had the same point in mind.

Where there was fire, there would be people.

He's not who you think he is. His sister's voice chanted through his mind. He wasn't sure what she had meant, but it was clear from her fear, from her words, that this was not a social visit.

He stepped into the parlor first, Robert following carefully at his back. A tiny noise, no greater than the soft mewl of a kitten caught his attention. Robert also jerked forward, both of their eyes landing on a sight that would follow Montgomery to his grave.

Marian seated in a chair, her hands tied neatly to the arms. Beside her, grinning at his new guests, stood a polished, pristine Fletcher. The dark shadow beyond him would be Salvatore, Montgomery was sure of it.

Robert growled at the sight.

"Montgomery, you brought a friend, I see." Fletcher gave Robert a sarcastic bow. "Assuming you are this creature's brother? You share a certain likeness."

Robert widened his stance, easily transforming from the carefully orchestrated aristocrat to someone Montgomery wouldn't have wanted to meet in the street any day. His face was a dangerous slate of marble, cool, calm, furious.

"Why don't we keep this between us Fletchers? Send the Devonshire darlings home." Montgomery rolled the last part, teasing lightness to his voice. He hoped that Fletcher wouldn't realize how forced it was. He needed Marian out of here, and her brother was more than a match to help him do that.

Fletcher smirked, his lips curling to one side. "Found Martha then. Good. I always liked that girl." He moved a few steps from Marian's side, tapping his fingers across his buttoned jacket. "But no, I'm sorry, we all need to clear some things up."

Robert began to step to the side, as they had planned. Montgomery stepped towards the group, his step sure. He had known

Fletcher, as well as his hired muscle, Salvatore for over six years now. They had never scared him before, but seeing them there, over Marian's prone form stirred a dark fear in his chest that he hated.

"I can make simple, Fletch, very simple." Montgomery urged his legs forward, focusing on keeping his pace to a casual stroll.

"Can you now, Nephew?" Fletcher stepped back towards Marian, his shifting eyes watching both men's progress across the furnished room. A sliver of firelight sneaked between him and Marian, illuminating her beautiful face, and the angry, purple welt across one side of it.

He felt his body coil, and it took everything in his arsenal to stay put. His fury radiated out into the room, filling his body with sharp readiness.

Fletcher noticed, looking down at Marian with a disappointed grimace across his face. "I'm sorry about that part, Salvatore got a bit carried away."

"A bit? Couldn't handle a woman half his size?" Montgomery continued to walk, he was halfway across the room now. He watched as Salvatore shifted in the shadows, his bulk illuminated briefly.

"You told me you could make this simple, Monty, please focus." Fletcher's tone was bored, one shoulder-shrugging up a bit as he faced them.

"I've lived thirty-two years of my life without this estate, without this name. I don't need any of it. Martha agrees. You let Marian and us walk out of here right now, then things will continue exactly as they have been." Montgomery stopped, popping a hip, he attempted to appear uncaring.

"Just like that?" Fletcher didn't believe him.

"You know me, Fletcher. I have no interest in this kind of forced domesticity."

"This was true. But I've seen the way you look at this princess here, I know you want her." Fletcher nudged her chair.

"Who said I haven't already had her?" Marian flinched, more

tears flowing freely down her face.

Fletcher threw back his dark head, laughter ringing out through space. "I should never have underestimated you. Perhaps we have even more in common than the bloodline."

Montgomery gave the man a predatory smile. "Yes, Uncle, we do share quite a few things. And there's one small detail that I can't stop thinking about." He paced a bit, forcing his eyes to be downcast, away from Marian and Fletcher.

"I'll bite. What is it?" Fletcher seemed annoyed; they were running dangerously short on time.

"First, let's get this sorted out," Montgomery flapped a hand towards Marian's sniffing form.

Fletcher narrowed his eyes, suspicion lacing his every move. "The girl stays. If you agree to denounce your name, as your father planned to, then I will safely deliver her back to your arms. Or his," Fletcher nodded to Robert, "By the end of the week."

Marian's face was pale, her eyes begging for his help. Something in him snapped. "No, Fletch. She comes with me today, or no deal."

Fletcher sighed, and Montgomery realized that the man was pleased with the way this had worked out. The thought made his temper flared again, burning away at the careful leash he kept it on.

"No deal. Now get out of here, Nephew. Take your bulldog with you."

"I won't." Montgomery looked straight at Marian. "This is my house now. Well, mine and Martha's."

Sharp, shrieking laughter rolled out of Fletcher as he looked at him. "You forget who is in charge here, Monty. Perhaps you take after my brother, but no one but the small group here knows what is happening. And I have a sneaking suspicion that the brother dearest over here will do anything to get his sister back. With them gone, who is to say that you aren't making false allegations to the man who has been supporting you for years."

Montgomery braced his feet against the now damp marble. The snow melting off of him in slow, measured drips. "Great point. See, when Martha said you were our uncle, something stood out in my mind, so clear. In the Blue Fiver ownership agreement that we have all signed, it is expressly forbidden to nominate, sell to, or even given any share of the club to a blood relative. Punishment to do so would be an explosion from the organization and the seizure of their assets related to the club."

Montgomery turned to face the man he had thought of as a mentor. "That's why I had Frank bring the Campbells here. If I'm not mistaken, Campbell had petitioned for years to you to allow his son to buy into the club. Interesting that you were so resistant to that aspect, even after you had nominated me, who you openly admit to being related to."

"Isn't that interesting, Frederick?" Montgomery raised his voice, as two men walked quietly into the room. Dressed for the cold, they wore matching faces of outrage. Frederick Campbell senior glared at Fletcher, who was looking less and less confident as his partner approached.

Behind the Campbells stood a smiling, snow-dusted Frank. Montgomery nodded to the young man, eternally grateful.

"All these years, Fletcher, we thought you were being difficult. Now we come to find out it was all a farce. This is out of control." Frederick Campbell spoke, his son angrily eyeing the woman who had been hired to be his children's governess. Now she was tied, held against her will. It was clear from his expression that there would be no mercy from the Campbells. Not for Stewart Fletcher.

"I can explain Fredrick, this is a misunderstanding." Fletcher's voice trembled as he stared down at his business partner. Even Salvatore seemed to have retreated, his shadowy form moving along the windows towards the opposite end of the parlor.

Every part of Montgomery wished to race forward, to yank out ropes from Marian's beautiful wrists, to kiss away her tears. But that was no longer his role to fill, he knew that now. It was Robert, and Fredrick junior, known as Fred, who rushed forward to yank away the bindings keeping Marian in place.

Fletcher and Fredrick squared off, their words low, guttural,

and angry. Montgomery didn't have the ability to pay attention, he was so enamored with the lovely woman who was safe in her brother's arms. To her credit, her face was serious, angry, the tears long dry on her cheeks as she glared at Fletcher and Salvatore with wrath in her eyes.

Montgomery's chest ached. She was the fiercest woman he'd ever met, and it only made him love her more.

FIFTEEN

The cool glass of water Robert pressed into her hand was a welcome relief against the starched, wool flavor of the gag that had been in her mouth for most of that afternoon. She felt she might never forget that taste. Or the way that she had felt there, tied down like an animal for slaughter. Her heart raced, even now that things had calmed a small amount.

Fletcher would be charged for his crimes. It wouldn't matter who he was, there were witnesses, proof, and of course the small matter that he wasn't a lord anymore.

Montgomery was.

The moment he had walked into the parlor, Marian's whole body had sung in the sweetest relief. She had known that Martha would find help, and in her heart, she knew he had to be him that would come for her. The only man she'd ever shared her true self with. Not the prim, mannered, delicate daughter of Lord Devonshire, but a woman who had her thoughts, dreams, hopes.

But then, having to sit there while Montgomery faced down his mentor and closest friend, had been torture. She had known then and there that she was deeply in love with him. Not just with the taste of his kisses, or the way his hands made her feel. She was in love with his work ethic, his smile, his laughter, and the way that he wanted something better for everyone around him.

Maybe that's why it had hurt her so badly, knowing that he saw no future with her. He had made it crystal clear that he would do nothing to risk his position with the Blue Fiver. She needed to come to terms with that. The sooner, the better, for her heart's sake.

And even if he had wanted her, his life would be tumultuous

for a long while now. His life would never be the same. With or without the Blue Fiver, Montgomery Bohart was now Montgomery Fletcher.

After Robert has whisked her away to the kitchens, she had heard bits and pieces of the conversation. Frederick Campbell, her new employer, was insistent upon him and his son staying with Fletcher until the authorities came to collect him. Salvatore, it seemed, had gone for a walk and never returned. Robert said his footsteps led into the snow and disappeared into the winter night.

Good riddance, she thought to a short breath.

The rest of the conversation had gotten confusing, and Marian regretted not listening more clearly, but her attention was waning. There had been something about a vote, and the redistribution of Fletcher's shares.

She had listened eagerly for any sound from Montgomery, or his sure, heavy footsteps on the floors. But there was nothing, but Robert's quiet breathing behind her.

Her eyelids grew heavy, the stress of the evening wearing on her. Marian wasn't sure what she wanted more. Her family, Montgomery, or her bed. Perhaps some combination of them all. When he strode into the dining room, his worried eyes immediately fell on her. Her traitorous heart skipped a beat as she drank him in.

"I wanted to see how you were doing." His voice was the same. Graveled, rumbling. She remembered how it had felt when he'd been inside of her, saying her name as the end of a prayer.

"I'll be fine, just ready to go home," Marian's voice was chipped, tight. "Thank you for coming for me. I don't know how I can ever thank you."

Montgomery's handsome face was somber, his throat working hard. "When I walked in, saw you there, I-I..." He looked to the floor; his hands turned to fists along his sides. Robert stirred behind her, catching Montgomery's attention. After a moment, they forcibly relaxed, the long fingers brushing against his trouser pants.

"I hope Martha is well?" Marian offered softly, unsure of how to respond.

Montgomery nodded, his jaw loosening into a polished smile. "She is safe in Eastwind, with the rest of the Campbells."

Marian nodded, "Abigail will be so happy to have her home." She heard someone saying Robert's name outside of the dining room. Robert quickly strode around the table, following the sound of his name.

Suddenly they were alone. Marian's mind was a bevy of thoughts, words, feelings. And yet, her mouth remained closed, tight. What Martha had said about Montgomery needing somebody was wrong. This man, even at his worst, still stood quiet, solemn.

He didn't need anybody. Certainly not her. At least not in the way that she needed him.

Montgomery grew restless in the quiet, shifting his feet against the marble floor. "Marian, I'm sorry about the other morning."

She held up a hand, her cheeks red and flushed. "Please, don't." Standing she moved to the door, dragging the hem of her dirty, tattered skirts with her.

"I was wrong. You have to know, I would give it up, all of it, for you." The pain in his voice turned her head, and her heart broke at the sight of him, standing alone in what was now his dining room.

"I know Montgomery, but I can't ask you to do that. Goodbye." Marian swept from the room, her steps hurried, desperate to put space between them. The last time she saw him, those glowing eyes were staring at her, the pain in them so fierce that she wondered if he could see that her own heart mirrored it.

Marian again stood in her family's townhome foyer. Her bags were laid out in a neat row in front of her, ready to be placed in her family's carriage for her trip to the Campbells. She'd been home for nearly a week, and while tonight would be the beginning of a brand-new year, Marian didn't feel like celebrating.

She was more than happy to spend her evening with her new charges and allow the Campbells the chance to enjoy the night

properly.

Smoothing a hand over her hair, Marian snuck a glance in the mirror, her fingers easing over the slight bruise on the right side of her cheek. While Salvatore had landed a heavy hit, Marian had been lucky, and the swelling had mostly gone down by the time she got home to Devonshire Townhouse.

The past few days had been a flurry of her mother and sister, not to mention Robert, who had fawned over her every move. Robert had even gone as far as to ask her to delay going to the Campbells a few weeks longer, so he could arrange a proper escort.

“It’s quite a short drive, Robert, we will be fine.” Marian had assured him a half-dozen times before he had let the subject die.

And now, today was the day. She had already said her goodbyes, laughing at her mother’s tears as they would still see each other several times a week for church and other functions when she attended with the Campbells. Nodding to the doorman, Marian reached down to pick up one of her bags. Her fidgety hands needed something to hold onto. It was time to go.

Her mother didn’t cry. The Dragon of Devonshire simply gathered her close, pressing her cheek to Marian. “You’re no darling. Not anymore, Marian. You’re a dragon, just like I knew you were.”

And now, as she walked up the stairs into the Campbells country mansion, Marian felt that. In her blood hummed the secret knowledge. Her strength, her sacrifice. She was proud of who she was.

Everything at the Campbells was lovely. The three-story home was an eclectic mix of Greek cultural influences, from Zoe Campbell, the lady of the house, within the shell of a traditional brick estate. Marian’s suite was lovely, and directly abutted the twin’s nursery.

Oh, and those girls, she knew they would steal her heart. Daria, the shy one with a dimpled chin, and her sister, Astrid, the bold, enthusiastic twin kept Marian’s days filled with laughter and plenty of chasing.

Sometimes Daria reminded her so much of Abigail, that an invisible rope would yank on her still bruised heart. Montgomery hadn’t visited during her week at the townhouse. And he hadn’t

written since she arrived here.

She'd been right. Montgomery Fletcher was going to be just fine without her. And as much as she wanted to be angry, it was a deep-rooted sadness that kept her awake at night, staring up in the canopy of her bed. The loss of something so great, she'd been too afraid to put a label on it.

But now. Those hesitations faded into the back of her mind. Instead, it was the memory of his mouth, his smile, and his hands that haunted her dreams. Her own hands tracing the paths he had taken, taking solstice in the tendrils of desire that followed. Marian allowed herself this indulgence, this pleasure, as she wasn't sure when she would experience it again.

One morning, shortly after she'd arrived, Frederick called her to his office. His son, the twin's father, had returned to his post along the Irish Sea, where he served the country as an ambassador. Marian had witnessed his goodbyes with the children, and it had been heart-wrenching.

To leave your children, for even a moment, would be torture. She couldn't imagine doing it for weeks at a time. No wonder their grandparents were so involved with the girls.

"Good morning, Mr. Campbell, may I come in?" Marian spoke clearly, Fredrick was immersed in his reading, and she worried he wouldn't hear her.

"Yes, Miss Wains, please do come in. I've received some news that I think you will find interesting."

Marian seated herself in the tall, leather-covered chair across the desk from him. Frederick put down his paper, sending a tender smile her way. "How are the girls this morning?"

"Oh, they are lovely, taking a break to play out in the side yard, Cook offered to watch them." Marian smiled; Frederick nodded his head.

"Good, good. I arranged a play date with an old friend for after this meeting if that's alright with you?"

Marian was a bit surprised, but recovered quickly, "I'm sure

they would love that.”

“And I wanted to let you know that the final decision came down about the Blue Fiver after that fiasco with Stewart Fletcher.”

Marian froze, her body humming as she stared at her employer. Afraid to speak and seem overeager, she nodded.

“I’m not sure how much you know, but we wrote into our bylaws that every decision, every amendment to the contract agreement has to be approved by the group, then voted on. It is why we originally sought out five individuals, there would always be a tie-breaker.”

Marian nodded.

“After Monty discovered what was going on with Fletcher, I asked him to write to the other five, explaining what had happened and asking them to vote. We had to agree to remove Fletcher, that was an easy one. He asked that we remove the family ties amendment so that we will be able to elect or nominate anybody we chose to fill our shoes. And there was one more thing that he asked.”

Frederick slid the letter across the table to her. He rose, straightening his jacket and giving her a kindly pat on the shoulder as he passed. “You can use my office to read it. Just don’t forget about their play date. The carriage will be here in roughly an hour.”

Marian took the letter, dumbfounded. As soon as the door clicked in the lock, she pulled it open frantically. In a smooth, swirly script, she recognized Montgomery’s handwriting immediately.

To my fellow owners,

I have one more amendment I wish to address and put to a vote. When the Blue Fiver was constructed and organized for obvious reasons there was a need to put in place the ban on marriages, or spouses within the club. I like to hope that it was for our future spouses’ best interest, and for the club’s best interest, to keep the focus on the matter at hand.

But here is the problem. I, Montgomery Fletcher, am the current operator of the Blue Fiver, until we find another who is fit for the position,

I am more than happy to fill this role. Or at least, I had been, until I met Miss Marian Wains.

Marian choked back a sob. She covered her mouth with one hand, biting into a knuckle.

I had forgotten what it was like to have someone care for you, to put your life, your dreams ahead of themselves. She didn't simply care for my niece, she built me up every day, making me a better man, a better human than I'd ever dreamed of being.

And truthfully, I've failed her. Failed her in so many ways. But I want to do what is right, what my heart wants, and I want to be with her. Not only because I love her, but because I don't think that I can continue to do anything without her by my side.

I was wrong before, that the best interest of the club doesn't mean that the man operating it cannot have anything else in his life. In some cases, like mine, having the love of your life be a part of you every day is well worth the implications. Let us right this wrong for future owners, for future operators who deserve love.

What say you?

Marian flipped to the next page, a response, in small, sharply written lines, Frederick's handwritten spelled out a simple reply.

I, Frederick Campbell, vote yes, to allow operators to marry while still under the binding contract of the Blue Fiver.

The floor spun under her feet. Another gasping sob slipped out from Marian's throat.

"I have four more like that." His voice filled her soul, and as she turned, she felt as if time slowed. Montgomery stood in the doorway, his hand still on the knob as he watched her carefully. His sorrowful blue eyes devouring her. "Frederick was the last to answer, so I came here to hurry him along."

Marian felt the tears slip down her face, she stood, turning to the man she loved. Shaking her head, she held out the paper.

"Did you mean this?" Marian's voice was broken, shattered with emotion.

“Every word, and more. I didn’t feel like the owners needed to know about the true depths of my torment.” Montgomery stepped into the room, his. “About how I tried desperately to get out of the Fiver contract, how I slept outside your townhouse every night that week after Fletcher took you. About how I quite literally, cannot function without you in my life.”

Montgomery walked across the office, his body moving with that catlike grace that drew her in the first time she met him.

Marian shook her head, pressing the letter to her chest. Her heart pounded, her body shaking at the sight of him. The person she had needed most, wanted most, he was here now, standing right in front of her.

“I wanted you to understand - wanted you to know that since that first moment I saw you, I have been trying to convince myself that you’d be better without me. That you deserved someone better than me. But I’m done with that.”

Marian nodded, hot tears swimming in her vision.

“I’m not saying it will be easy, nothing ever has been with me.” Montgomery paused just in front of her, his face earnest. With much deliberation, he went slowly to his knee.

“But I love you, Marian Wains, very, very much. And I need you. What I need to know now is whether you will end my torment, agree to share your life with me.” Montgomery’s face split into a smile, his eyes filled with tears as he picked up her hand, squeezing it within his two larger ones.

Marian laughed softly, staring down at this amazing man, kneeling humbly in front of her. He was everything she needed and more. Their life may not be ballrooms and croquet, but it would be filled with late-night talks, burning kisses, and more love than she could’ve ever asked for.

“I love you too. It would be my honor to share your life with you.” Marian gasped, her words cut off as Montgomery swept her up and into his arms, her legs dangling against hers.

For a moment, their eyes met, and sweet, sharp love enveloped

both of them. The next Marian giggled, her hands curling around his jaw, her eyes flickering over his handsome face.

“I have one question.” Marian ran her fingers across his lips, feeling the wonderful solidarity of him against her.

“Anything,” Montgomery whispered, his voice low.

Marian grinned at him, teasing him. “Do I have to be a Fletcher? I feel like --” Montgomery laughed once before sealing his lips over hers, muffling her cry of laughter.

When he finally pulled back, Marian was breathless, her face flushed.

“If I have to be a Fletcher, so do you,” Montgomery said tenderly, watching her. His fingers danced across her cheeks, adoration clear in every line of his face.

“Then it will be my pleasure,” Marian replied, pulling him back down to her lips.

SIXTEEN

“I’m not sure you’ve heard, but I’m a lord now. The only suitable option would be to marry a lady of good standing.”

Marian snorted. The delicate sound still somehow as proper and posh as the rest of her. Montgomery swept his hand down her back, turning his betrothed to face him once more. “Oh my, wherever could you find one of those?”

“I have no idea,” he whispered against her skin.

“Behave, Montgomery. Or I will tell the whole world the Montgomery No-heart is in fact a giant puppy when it comes to the women in his life.”

Montgomery still, his fingers quiet against the satin of her cheek. “Only a very stupid man would ever fail to appreciate what I have in my life.”

“And what is that?” Marian barely breathed.

Montgomery pulled her in, letting those sinful, delicious lips take hers in a long, slow kiss. One that left her toes curling in her shoes and her chest aching for more. When he finally pulled back, she followed, pressing soft, open-mouthed kisses along his neck until finally, he gripped her shoulders, pressing her away.

“My dragon, we cannot be seen like this.”

“Is it bad for your image?” Marian purred, settling back against the carriage cushions once more.

Montgomery smiled slowly. “It’s exactly what I like for my image. A man obsessed by his betrothed. However, I feel like your

mother would be less inclined to find her daughter pressed against my trousers in such a way.”

Marian smiled. “You’re just scared of her.”

“Terrified, my love, terrified.”

Marian tilted her head back, letting joyful laughter ring free as she cuddled up next to her love. “Don’t worry, Montgomery, she won’t bite.”

As if summoned by the devil himself, Catherine Wains was suddenly at the door to their carriage. Climbing inside as a queen might, her chin high, her cheeks harsh and unyielding as she observed her daughter and the man who had stolen her heart.

“Bohart.”

Montgomery flushed, tugging slightly at his cravat. Marian watched the soft skin of his neck turn a brighter pink. “It’s Fletcher now, my lady.”

“As you’re soon to be my son, why can’t I call you Montgomery?”

Beside her, Montgomery went still. The entire ton respected and looked up to her. Her acceptance, her love, was a message far beyond any blessing they might’ve been able to secure.

“It would be an honor,” Montgomery finally got out. Marian tried to ignore the choke at the back of his voice. At the gentle acceptance in her mother’s sharp face.

“Then Montgomery it is. Where are we going anyway?” Catherine craned her neck around. “When I told Nicholas to marry for love I mean it in jest. The man is about to marry his mistress. God help us all.”

She shook her head, but the silvery blue eyes that Marian saw danced with joy and humor. Marian only grinned, settling herself back against the cushion and Montgomery’s warmth.

They would be married later this Spring, or perhaps this Summer. After the final renovations at the Blue Fiver penthouse were

complete, and the destruction and rebuild of Fletcher's previous home had been completed.

The Blue Fiver owners wanted Montgomery to remain its operator. He had accepted, with one condition. That he could maintain and operate business out of his new estate part of the year. This Christmas, he promised, Marian could throw a party worthy of every gossip rag in London.

Martha had moved into the suite that Marian had lived in during her time at the Blue Fiver, and she and Abigail were happy there. For now at least. Montgomery had already added a dowager house to the Fletcher estate rebuild. He would not be parted from his twin or his beloved niece ever again.

They were not what society had planned for. But at his side, she'd found her own strength, her own wants and needs. He did not care where she came from, only that she loved him with the same ferociousness that he did her. Together they would pave their own path.

The End

I hope you enjoyed reading about Monty and Marian's unorthodox love story. If you did, I would appreciate you leaving a short review on Amazon or Goodreads. Reviews are so critical to authors, and sharing your thoughts would be much appreciated.

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